

Nevada must take environmental protection into its own hands now

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In an arid state like Nevada, you might think the Trump administration's rollback of federal Clean Water Act protections might not have much of an effect.

Think again.

Wetlands, intermittent streams, river watersheds, groundwater supplies and more are now vulnerable to pollution from any number of sources in Nevada thanks to Trump's reprehensible action.

Think arsenic, lead compounds, mercury and other heavy metals from mines being released into wetlands. Think waste fluid from fracking being discharged into streams and being carried to larger bodies of water during storms. Think chemical solvents from manufacturing plants being dumped into washes and then spreading into the soil when rains hit.

All of this is a possibility now that Trump and his Republican supporters have drastically limited the types of waterways that fall under federal protections.

This is unacceptable, and Nevada leaders must respond immediately to it.

The state has some water protections in place, but those will need to be strengthened significantly. With the governor's office and both chambers of the Legislature now in the hands of Democrats, leadership should hit the ground running on this issue when the legislative session begins in February.

The health and well-being of all Nevadans are at risk, as is the state's wildlife.

With the exception of Las Vegas, virtually all state residents rely on groundwater for their drinking water. Pollution of those sources would have widespread consequences.

Meanwhile, damage to wetlands and river watersheds would not only spoil our environment, but eliminate areas for outdoor recreation.

Keep in mind, too, that children are at the highest risk of suffering health problems related to pollution. Look at the Flint, Mich., water crisis, where the city has implemented a range of intervention programs to help children overcome future challenges caused by lead exposure. Those can include cognitive and behavioral issues. Sadder yet is that because lead is an irreversible neurotoxin, exposure to it is difficult to treat.

Threats like these aren't remote in Nevada, either, considering that the state ranks No. 2 nationally in the amount of toxic chemicals released into the environment, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Only Alaska ranks above us.

The Colorado River, which provides the vast majority of Las Vegas' drinking water, would remain protected. But areas that drain into it would not, making it even more important for state-level action.

People in some parts of Las Vegas, particularly the central valley, already deal with the effects of pollution in the water system. Dry cleaning chemicals that were dumped in washes and then formed plumes in the soil are still being cleaned up decades later. These carcinogenic chemicals can cause damage to the brain and nervous system through long-term exposure and in high concentrations.

Now, the Trump administration has opened the door to similar polluting.

Environmentalists say the rollback, combined with similar actions by the Trump administration in other areas, have created a crisis.

“We’re seeing a systematic dismantling of our entire environmental protection system,” said Patrick Donnelly, Nevada state director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “It’s an assault on all fronts — our air, our water, our wildlife, our climate, everything. It’s dreadful.”

For state leaders, this is a call to action. It’s up to us to protect our waterways.