

Proposed 30 percent cut to EPA could hit New Mexico hard

By **Rebecca Moss**, *The New Mexican*

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Steep proposed federal cuts to the budget of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency could mean the loss of millions of dollars for New Mexico, a national advocacy group warns in a new report.

Over the last five years, grants from the EPA have brought more than \$111 million to the state for environmental programs such as water- and air-pollution control, oversight of drinking-water systems and cleanup of contaminated sites such as the shuttered molybdenum mine near Questa. Some of the money has funded environmental projects on tribal land, and just under half of the money has gone toward the New Mexico Environment Department.

According to a review by the Environmental Defense Fund, a New York-based nonprofit, EPA cuts could hurt such programs in the state.

“When the budget of EPA is constricted, it is often the state and local governments and the people they represent that suffer,” said Elgie Holstein, a senior policy expert with the Environmental Defense Fund who worked as an energy policy adviser for President Barack Obama’s campaign and served as chief of staff for the Department of Energy under the Clinton administration.

Earlier this year, President Donald Trump’s administration outlined a roughly 30 percent cut in funding across the agency. But congressional appropriations for fiscal year 2018, which began in October, would see many agency programs and grants reduced by about 10 percent.

Between 2012 and 2016, New Mexico received more than \$20 million from the EPA to help ensure public water systems are complying with drinking-water regulations, to monitor pollution and to take enforcement actions against violators, the Environmental Defense Fund says in its report.

During this period, more than \$12 million in federal funds was used for smog monitoring while more than \$10 million has come into the state for cleanup work at 20 Superfund sites, where jet fuel, dry-cleaning chemicals and other industrial pollutants have led to significant groundwater contamination.

Many of these decades-long cleanup projects, such as that at the former Questa molybdenum mine, are still ongoing.

Next year’s proposed cuts would affect chemical safety programs, the Office of Environmental Enforcement, clean air and greenhouse gas reporting programs, and the Office of Environmental Justice.

Under an appropriations bill released in November, lawmakers also have proposed eliminating the EPA's Integrated Risk Information System, which provides research and safety assessments of common chemicals used in homes and buildings.

Many people incorrectly assume such chemicals have been tested before they hit the market, Holstein said.

"The public doesn't always understand that EPA is funding so much work in their backyard," he said.

New Mexico's pueblos receive roughly \$1 million each in environmental grants, which Holstein said are now at risk of cuts. Taos Pueblo has received \$1,651,504 in EPA grants between 2012 and 2016, while Picuris Pueblo has received about half of that, \$759,901.

Amigos Bravos, a Taos-based environmental nonprofit that works on water and watershed issues, also benefited from EPA grants to the tune of \$115,326, the report states.

Funding is also vulnerable for New Mexico's more than 260 brownfield sites — areas with significant contamination that the state and local governments hope to clean up and reuse for economic development projects.

Even Santa Fe Community College could take a hit. It recently received a \$200,000 EPA grant for a program that provides environmental cleanup certification, including hazardous waste training, at no cost to those who enroll.

The program has allowed many state workers to receive specialized training and find higher-wage jobs, those averaging \$17 an hour, said Janet Kerley, an environmental, health and safety instructor at the college who administers the training program.

She called the proposed EPA cuts "a pretty significant hit."

At a national event on brownfield sites this fall, she said, EPA officials told the attendees that grant funding was likely to decrease or awards might be issued less frequently.

The college already has seen a decline in its EPA grant funding. Last time the grant was awarded for the hazardous waste training program, Kerley said, the school received \$100,000 more.

But the state still has a need for people trained to carry out the cleanup work.

"We still have a lot of environmental work to be done in New Mexico," Kerley said, listing work at the shuttered mine in Questa, and Los Alamos National Laboratory, where "they still have a great need for the trained workforce for the cleanup they are doing up there."

The loss in federal funding will put more pressure on a state agency that has struggled for years with a flat budget, Holstein said, calling the air- and water-monitoring work "a legal obligation. The state is arguably legally vulnerable if it doesn't pick up the slack," he said ... The threat to New Mexicans and others across the country is very real."

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., the ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, expressed outrage about the appropriations bill, saying in an emailed statement that it "included unacceptable cuts."

"While funding for the EPA looks like a 2 percent cut," he said, "the bill actually directs double-digit cuts to programs that would risk people's health and safety and undermines the protection of our environment."

Udall said he intended to introduce an amendment to the bill, which would have increased grant funding for clean water and drinking water programs and would have restored funding for chemical safety research, but he didn't have the opportunity because of how the bill was handled.

Instead of being marked up in a committee process, the bill was posted online, bypassing the opportunity for certain amendments to be considered.

"The Trump administration's _EPA is not being straight with the American people," Udall said.

Allison Majure, a spokeswoman for the state Environment Department, said, "The New Mexico Environment Department's dedicated staff and leadership work steadily with what we have, despite budgetary fluctuations, to protect and restore the environment and to foster a healthy and prosperous New Mexico for present and future generations."

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An old mine tailing pond near Questa where various companies — most recently Chevron — mined molybdenum, a steel hardener. Before the site closed in 2014, it held the unique position of being both a Superfund site as well as an active mine.

File photo



Graphic by The New Mexican