

# Data On Corporate Pollution And Emissions Now Threatened Under Trump



*Michael Ash - PERI -University of Massachusetts Amherst*

*02-17-2025 ~ Researchers have published data on corporate pollution and emissions since 2004. Now the data is at risk under Trump.*

Since the late 1980s, just [100 companies have been responsible for 71 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions](#). Researchers at the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst publish annual lists of the top corporate air and water polluters and top greenhouse gas emitters in the U.S. They have just released the [latest data](#) amid widespread fear that our environmental crisis will rapidly worsen in the next four years as the Trump administration rolls back regulations and stalls climate action at the federal level.

In the interview that follows, Michael Ash, professor of economics at UMass Amherst and one of the main researchers behind the PERI project tracking U.S. corporate pollution, shares the latest data identifying the biggest corporate polluters, discusses the potential impact of Donald Trump’s “Unleashing American Energy” policy and offers his thoughts on how activists can push back against corporate polluters. The interview that follows has been lightly edited for clarity.

*C. J. Polychroniou: PERI has released the latest yearly editions of the [Greenhouse](#)*

[100 Polluters, Suppliers and Coal Indexes](#), and [Toxic 100 Air and Water Polluters Indexes](#). These track the environmental performance of U.S.-based industrial activity and identify those corporations that produce the largest share of emissions as well as air and water pollution. You are one of the main PERI researchers behind this project, so which industrial corporations are the biggest polluters according to the most recent data, from 2022?

*Michael Ash:* In terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the top polluters are the large electrical generators, with Vistra Energy, Southern Company, Duke Energy, Berkshire Hathaway (which has a large generating portfolio) and American Electric Power topping the list. In fact, ExxonMobil is the only nonelectricity corporation in the Greenhouse Top 10. The dominance of electricity is not surprising because much energy in the U.S. is still produced by burning fossil fuels (around 60 percent in 2023 according to [the U.S. Energy Information Administration](#)). The coal share of U.S. electricity has declined a lot, but natural gas has expanded.

The Toxic100.org looks at industrial toxics, corporate facilities' release of roughly 600 highly toxic substances into the environment. Here the profile is a bit different, with large chemical, plastics and rubber, and petroleum-processors at the top of the list. Dow, ExxonMobil and Tesla (largely due to the latter's heavy metals waste at its Sparks, Nevada, battery gigafactory) are ranked high on either or both the Toxic Air and Toxic Water lists.

A dimension we added recently is the supply of greenhouse gas precursors into the economy — basically the extraction and processing or imports of oil, coal or natural gas. At the top of the Greenhouse Suppliers list are large refiners, Marathon, ExxonMobil, Valero and Phillips 66, joined by a big coal producer, Peabody Corporation.

*Do we know how emissions from top industrial polluters compare with gross emissions from entire states?*

That's a good question and I don't have the data to draw comparisons. But we see extraordinary disproportionality in industrial pollution, an enormous share of the total pollution impacts coming from a handful of polluters at the top of the scale. This is particularly evident in the GHG domain. For the Greenhouse 100 polluters, where the top four companies alone — the electrical generators Vistra, Southern,

Duke and Berkshire Hathaway — account for more than 5 percent of all U.S. greenhouse gas releases from all sources. For the Greenhouse 100 suppliers, the top of the list is again enormously concentrated, with the ultimate emissions from the top 10 greenhouse gas suppliers accounting for around 40 percent of all supply.

*Does the list of the biggest industrial polluters change significantly from year to year?*

We archive our data and so it's possible to track polluters over time, although we tend to highlight the current large polluters. Polluting facilities change hands frequently, like poker chips among the major players. The lists have been generally stable with the big players: the large electricity generators on the Greenhouse 100 Polluters; large oil and coal producers on the Greenhouse 100 Suppliers; and large chemicals, plastics and rubber, and petroleum on the Toxic 100.

*New rules to reduce pollution from fossil fuel-fired power in order to protect communities and improve public health went into effect only during the final months of Joe Biden's presidency. First, why do you think the Biden administration waited so long to finalize new rules to clean up air pollution from power plants and, second, has there been an improvement in the performance of air and water polluters over the last few years?*

The toxic risk picture has improved over the past 20 years, with especially large reductions in the first decade of the 21st century. That's partly a function of industrial decline rather than industrial greening, and some polluting activities may have moved offshore rather than disappearing altogether.

Greenhouse gases present a gloomier picture. Total U.S. [greenhouse gas emissions](#) have declined, returning to roughly 1990 levels after a peak around 2005, but the decline is largely in the electrical generation sector with the conversion from coal accounting for much of the decline. Some of that conversion from coal is to renewables. However, much of the reduction represents conversion from coal to gas, which is an improvement in terms of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour, but remains a potent source of GHG emissions and leaves the U.S. well short of the path of emissions reductions to meet globally needed decarbonization targets.

The new fossil fuel electric power standards are a step in the right direction. They reduce both GHG and local pollutant emissions from existing (and new) coal facilities and from new gas facilities. These are welcome developments and should improve air quality and hasten the demise of coal. The new standards do not include the large fleet of existing natural gas facilities. If implemented, the new standards will substantially reduce GHG emissions from the electric power sector, reducing emissions by 2035 to roughly half of what they would be without the standards in place.

Both our Toxic 100 and Greenhouse 100 projects rely on critical right-to-know data mandated by law and federal regulation. The right to know may be in jeopardy. A couple of key Environmental Protection Agency websites for tracking toxics were offline for several days earlier in the month but they are back up now although no one knows for how long.

*The Biden administration left office with what can only be considered a tremendously contradictory record on climate action. The Inflation Reduction Act charted a fundamentally different course for U.S. climate action, but the total emissions reduction falls way short of U.S.'s Paris climate commitment, which is in itself hardly adequate to tackle the climate crisis. On top of that, under Biden, oil production surged to record levels despite his campaign promise to end drilling on public lands.*

*Now, given that the Trump administration has promised a large-scale demolition of government regulations and even more gas and oil drilling, wouldn't we expect to see an escalation of greenhouse gas emissions by U.S. industrial corporations in the years ahead? Can you address the objective behind Trump's executive order "[Unleashing American Energy](#)" and the potential impacts it may have on climate and the environment? Also, what in your view are the best ways for activists to push back against big polluters, which include of course the Pentagon, as the U.S. military is one of the largest polluters in history?*

It's hard to respond to "Unleashing" because the policies are so incoherent, many are unconstitutional or subject to legal challenge, and many of the premises — for example, the notion that Biden instituted an "electric vehicle mandate" — are simply false.

It seems clear that the Trump administration will give fossil fuel companies free

rein, adding to the climate crisis. The new power plant rules are a case in point. These rules, which are inadequate in my opinion, would still substantially reduce GHG emissions from the electrical energy sector (to roughly half of their otherwise expected level in 2035). Rolling those back would be a disaster.

The withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and rescinding Biden's environmental justice commitments are among the ill-conceived and (literally) toxic policies that will damage public health and contribute to environmental and social degradation.

It will be interesting — if that's the right word to use in a crisis — to see if there is in fact a rollback on renewables. I was driving across West Texas this summer on our family road trip, and looking out the windshield, at one moment we could see fracking rigs, oil derricks, vast arrays of windmills on top of buttes, and really large-scale (it's Texas) solar farms. We were looking at an all-energy landscape, with abundance and profit taking precedence over climate and health. I suspect that the big renewable players will not part gently with their energy strategy, supported by market forces, technological progress and substantial subsidies in the Inflation Reduction Act. It's thin gruel to hope for entrenched capitalist interests to come to the rescue.

The U.S. government is indeed one of the larger polluters on our lists. The [U.S. government](#) is seventh among GHG polluters (much of it from federal fossil energy facilities such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, but some of it from military facilities), and [just outside the top 100](#) among toxic air polluters and a substantial source of [toxic water pollution](#). The toxic releases are largely from U.S. military facilities.

For activists, top priorities are mobilizing to reverse the Trump administration orders and actions that are unconstitutional or otherwise illegal. Defending the right to know should be a high priority; the U.S. does a lot of regulation by right to know rather than by, say, directly prohibiting or limiting the release of toxics. Without right to know, we're acting in the dark. There can be other sites of mobilization: State and local governments, schools (see our [Air Toxics at School project](#)) and workplaces can all become more exciting and effective sites for organizing and change.

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