

To much fanfare, Trump has issued a slew of executive orders, many aimed at killing environmental regulations. As he portrayed his actions the day before, “Starting tomorrow, I will act with historic speed and strength and fix every single crisis facing our country.”

True, many people will see the executive orders in that light. But few executive orders have any immediate impact. They’re basically nudges to various agencies to carry out his agenda. Presidents love issuing executive orders. It’s easy to do, and many people will credit the president with major accomplishment. But really, as someone recently said, an executive order is “just a memo on fancy letterhead.”

Admittedly, the executive orders cover an impressive range of subjects. Some orders set the stage for politicizing the civil service and supporting Elon Musk’s budget-cutting recommendations. A cluster of orders involving the environment are on the way, covering the following subjects:

1. Halting spending under the IRA and other clean energy laws,
2. Speeding construction of pipelines
3. Expediting energy permitting, especially coal, natural gas and shale projects
4. Opening-up offshore drilling
5. Repealing rules on electric vehicles
6. Opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling and speed the development of energy production from Alaska
7. Declaring a national emergency related to energy.

None of these were exactly surprises. In most cases, the effect of the executive order is simply to direct an administrative agency to take some action, and nothing will change in the real world until the action has been taken.

Note that the final entry on the list is to declare a national emergency relating to energy. There’s nothing to prevent Trump from doing so, but declaring the emergency only sets the stage for other actions by administrative agencies. These actions will have to be taken under specific statutes, and at this point it’s not clear that anything major is likely to happen as a result.

One thing that no one can deny is that Trump is brilliant at political theater. People overlook the importance of that at their peril. But theater isn’t reality, and it remains to be seen how many of the grand gestures Trump made today will eventuate in significant policy changes.

Note: I will update this post during the day as more details about executive orders become available.

