EPA News Highlights 4.12.18

The Oklahoman: EPA Gains Clouded By Controversies Involving Pruitt

It looked for a time last week as though Scott Pruitt, embroiled in another controversy, might be shown the door as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. But Pruitt remains on the job and we hope that continues, because he's made a difference at the EPA. At the same time, however, it's hard to ignore the constant drumbeat of criticism, even if it largely stems from those on the left who were mortified when President Trump tapped Pruitt for the job and have worked unceasingly to derail his work since arriving in Washington. Yet pointing at the other guy and saying "He (or she) did plenty of things wrong, too," isn't a great defense. Pruitt has led major reform at EPA by, among other things, undoing the Waters of the U.S. rule, working to repeal the Clean Power Plan and revising burdensome fuel-economy standards, all products of the Obama administration. These moves and others have enraged the left and he'll continue to be their chief target, but he nonetheless should take pains not to give them more fodder for their assaults.

The Daily Caller: SCOOP: The White House Just Got Pruitt's Plan To Repeal WOTUS. Here Are The Details

White House officials are reviewing an updated Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposal to repeal the Obama administration's "waters of the United States" that expanded federal control over waters on private property. EPA officials submitted a supplemental proposal to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on Thursday. The proposal clarifies the agency is in fact repealing the Obama-era regulation and addressing some concerns brought up by stakeholders. The proposal also states EPA will be re-codifying the pre-Obama definition of WOTUS, The Daily Caller News Foundation has learned. The Obama administration finalized the Clean Water Rule in 2015 that expanded the definition of "waters of the United States" (WOTUS), arguing the rule was needed to clear up uncertainties in the wake of two U.S. Supreme Court decisions. More than half of U.S. states sued EPA to have the rule overturned. The courts quickly issued regulatory stays on the Clean Water Rule, meaning it never really went into effect. Manufacturers, energy companies, farmers, ranchers and land developers said the Obama-era rule would only make it harder to do business and manage land.

CBS News: Here Are Some Of The Threats Made Against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt

CBS News has obtained an August 2017 report prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency's office of inspector general that contains a list of 13 threats made against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and his family. The threats range in severity, credibility and specificity. One tweet flagged by investigators said, "Pruitt, I'm gonna find you and put a bullet between your eyes. Don't think I'm joking. I'm planning this." Investigators believe the threat was made by someone living in India. Another person wished the administrator "a very painful and horrible death through poisoning. Please explain the scientific method to this freaking neanderthal." The inspector general also looked into a complaint that "unknown protesters attempted to disrupt the EPA Administrator's speech during a closed event." Another person emailed the EPA threatening to dump old paint outside Pruitt's door. The threats took various forms -- some arriving via social media and email, others by postcard. Pruitt's daughter received a menacing message on Facebook, the document reveals.

CNN: Vote Slated For Thursday For Former Inhofe Aide Wheeler To Be EPA's No. 2

The Senate is set to vote on Andrew Wheeler to be the number two official at the Environmental Protection Agency amid ethics concerns plaguing EPA chief Scott Pruitt and calls from Democrats for him to resign. If Pruitt left, it could fall to Wheeler to run the agency until a new administrator is confirmed. Two GOP leadership aides told CNN they expected Wheeler to be approved, which would make him the latest appointee at the agency with close ties to the energy industry. While there is widespread opposition to Wheeler in the Democratic caucus, two Democrats running for reelection from energy producing states that strongly backed President Donald Trump in 2016 have said they will vote for him: Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota.

Bloomberg: Here's Why Friends And Foes Of EPA Chief Pruitt Are So Adamant

Supporters and detractors of Environmental Protection Agency head Scott Pruitt agree on this much: He matters. Narrow that list to the new rules that have actually been issued, and Pruitt's impact is even harder to spot. Of the 24 economically significant regulations that have been approved by the White House under President Donald Trump, just

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one was issued by the EPA, according to data posted by the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. And that rule set the amount of renewable fuels that must be used in 2018 -- a regulation the EPA must issue every year, regardless of who's in charge. "Without a doubt, Scott Pruitt has been the single most effective appointment of the president of the United States," said Tim Huelskamp, president of the Heartland Institute, an industry-funded nonprofit that advocates for less regulation.

The Washington Times: Here Are The Legitimate Death Threats Against Scott Pruitt That Dems Claim Don't Exist
One of the more sickening episodes of the full-court press by members of The Swamp against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt is the claim that he has spent too much money on extravagant security details. Democrats in the Senate have questioned the legitimacy of death threats against Pruitt and his family and have demanded hearings to investigate the matter: Two top Democrats on the committee, ranking member Thomas R. Carper of Delaware and Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, on Tuesday demanded such hearings, saying they have confidential documents that contradict public statements made by Pruitt, EPA spokespersons and President Donald Trump regarding the administrator's security spending. The lawmakers in their letter asserted that the documents in their hands fall far short of supporting claims by Pruitt's office that he needed elaborate security measure to protect him from death threats.

The Washington Free Beacon: Breaking: Liberals Suddenly Care About Wasting Taxpayer Money
I suddenly have a lot of competition covering my beat. Who knew the mainstream media cared how our taxpayer dollars are wasted? Security costs for cabinet secretaries are "steep." Spending is "lavish" again. When, God forbid, a secretary takes his wife with him on a business trip, CNN is there with the documents in hand, showing her "involvement." The New York Times is now giving tips on how to save taxpayers money, while lambasting Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's use of military charter flights. (Mnuchin's travel ended up costing half of what Obama administration secretaries spent on average. Oddly, the Times never followed up.) The latest target is Scott Pruitt, arguably President Trump's most effective cabinet secretary. While there is questionable conduct for sure, like using an obscure law to give aides huge taxpayer-funded raises, it's curious the media suddenly care how much international junkets cost. The first scandal that caught the press's attention was Pruitt's trip to Italy last summer to attend the G-7 summit, which cost $84,000 in airfare and security, roughly the same that Lisa Jackson, Obama's first EPA administrator, spent on average on flights and security for four international trips. The headlines for Jackson's trip to the same summit in Syracuse, Italy, in early 2009 were slightly different. The Times has hit Pruitt for his "extravagant spending" on private flights and 24-hour security. But not too long ago it was the Times defending lavish trips on the taxpayer's dime. "There is nothing like a little Mediterranean beach vacation to unwind," the Times wrote back in August 2010. Do tell.

Reuters: Trump Administration Weighs High-Ethanol Fuel Waiver To Placate Farmers
The Trump administration is considering allowing the sale of a higher ethanol fuel blend in the summer, a source familiar with the issue said, a move that would placate corn growers worried about the future of U.S. biofuels policy. President Donald Trump recently met with the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to discuss ways to make the Renewable Fuel Standard less expensive to the oil industry without undercutting demand for ethanol. The RFS requires refiners to add increasing volumes of biofuels like corn-based ethanol into the nation's fuel supply each year which is a boon to farmers but a headache for refining companies that must either blend the fuels themselves or purchase credits from those who do.

City Journal: Scott Pruitt, Warrior for Science
Imagine if the head of a federal agency announced a new policy for its scientific research: from now on, the agency would no longer allow its studies to be reviewed and challenged by independent scientists, and its researchers would not share the data on which their conclusions were based. The response from scientists and journalists would be outrage. By refusing peer review from outsiders, the agency would be rejecting a fundamental scientific tradition. By not sharing data with other researchers, it would be violating a standard transparency requirement at leading scientific journals. If a Republican official did such a thing, you'd expect to hear denunciations of this latest offensive in the "Republican war on science." That's the accusation being hurled at Scott Pruitt, the Republican who heads the Environmental Protection Agency. But Pruitt hasn't done anything to discourage peer review. In fact, he's done the opposite: he has called for the use of more independent experts to review the EPA's research and has just announced

that the agency would rely only on studies for which data are available to be shared. Yet Democratic officials and liberal journalists have denounced these moves as an "attack on science," and Democrats have cited them (along with accusations of ethical violations) in their campaign to force Pruitt out of his job.

National News Highlights 4.12.18

The Wall Street Journal: U.S. Weekly Jobless Claims Hold Below 300,000 for Longest Streak on Record
The number of Americans claiming new unemployment benefits has never been so low for so long. Initial jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs across the U.S., decreased by 9,000 to a seasonally adjusted 233,000 in the week ended April 7, the Labor Department said Thursday. This means claims have now held below 300,000 for 162 consecutive weeks, cementing the longest streak for weekly records dating back to 1967. The current streak eclipsed the previous longest stretch that ended in April 1970. The consistently low claims levels point to labor market health because they mean relatively few Americans are losing their jobs and applying for benefits to tide them over until they can find new employment. After several years of consistent job growth, firms are reluctant to let employees go in a tightening labor market in which many available workers are quickly snapped up.

The Washington Post: As Fears Mount Over Open U.S.-Russia Conflict, Moscow Seeks To Lower The Temperature
Russian officials on Thursday sought to tamp down public fears of a looming conflict with the United States, even as Syrian government forces took control of the town where they are suspected of carrying out a chemical attack last weekend. Russian military police also entered Douma on Thursday to act as "guarantors of law and order in the town," the Russian Defense Ministry said, according to Russian news agencies. Russian troops had arrived earlier Monday under the terms of a surrender deal reached with the rebels after the suspected chemical attack — which Russia and Syria say did not happen. The recapture of Douma, in the region of Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, effectively represents the end of the war between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the rebel groups opposing his rule. Although chunks of the country remain under opposition control, none are as symbolic as Eastern Ghouta.

TRUMP TWEETS

The Oklahoman

http://newsok.com/epa-gains-clouded-by-controversies-involving-pruitt/article/5590556
EPA Gains Clouded By Controversies Involving Pruitt
By The Oklahoman Editorial Board, 4/12/18

It looked for a time last week as though Scott Pruitt, embroiled in another controversy, might be shown the door as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. But Pruitt remains on the job and we hope that continues, because he's made a difference at the EPA.

At the same time, however, it's hard to ignore the constant drumbeat of criticism, even if it largely stems from those on the left who were mortified when President Trump tapped Pruitt for the job and have worked unceasingly to derail his work since arriving in Washington.

Late last week, the federal government's top ethics official wrote a letter to the person in charge of ethics at the EPA warning of possible ethics violations by Pruitt, who served six years as Oklahoma's attorney general before going to Washington.

"Reports of the administrator making frequent official trips to his home state at government expense to offset the expense of returning home for personal or political reasons do raise concerns about whether the administrator is using his public office for personal gain in violation of ethics rules," the letter said.

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In recent weeks, some Republican members of Congress have called for Pruitt to resign or be fired. One member, Rep. Carlos Curbelo of Florida, said Pruitt's "corruption scandals are an embarrassment to the administration."

Among other things, Pruitt has been criticized for occasional first-class travel — the bill during his first year on the job totaled about $105,000, according to Politico — and for expensive security expenditures. Most recently, Pruitt has come under fire for spending several months last year in a lobbyist's D.C. condominium at $50 per night, and for giving two top aides large pay raises after the White House denied the request.

Pruitt has said the raises were enacted not by him but by someone else, and that they had been reversed. As for the condo deal, it was approved by an EPA ethics official who has been at the agency 18 years. Mollie Ziegler Hemmingway, writing at the conservative website The Federalist, noted: "The general rental space also was used by three members of Congress for fundraising on days Pruitt wasn't in town. He wasn't invited to the events, didn't attend them, and even if he had no ethics laws would have been violated ..."

Conservative defenders of Pruitt note that the Obama EPA had numerous controversies when led by administrators Lisa Jackson and Gina McCarthy. It is indeed a hoot that Jackson, who used a fake name and private email address while conducting official EPA business, has criticized Pruitt for a lack of transparency.

Yet pointing at the other guy and saying "He (or she) did plenty of things wrong, too," isn't a great defense. Pruitt has led major reform at EPA by, among other things, undoing the Waters of the U.S. rule, working to repeal the Clean Power Plan and revising burdensome fuel-economy standards, all products of the Obama administration. These moves and others have enraged the left and he'll continue to be their chief target, but he nonetheless should take pains not to give them more fodder for their assaults.

The Daily Caller

http://dailycaller.com/2018/04/12/scoop-white-house-gets-pruitts-plan-to-repeal-wotus/

SCOOP: The White House Just Got Pruitt's Plan To Repeal WOTUS. Here Are The Details

By Michael Bastasch, 4/12/18

White House officials are reviewing an updated Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposal to repeal the Obama administration's "waters of the United States" that expanded federal control over waters on private property.

EPA officials submitted a supplemental proposal to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on Thursday. The proposal clarifies the agency is in fact repealing the Obama-era regulation and addressing some concerns brought up by stakeholders. The proposal also states EPA will be re-codifying the pre-Obama definition of WOTUS, The Daily Caller News Foundation has learned.

The Obama administration finalized the Clean Water Rule in 2015 that expanded the definition of "waters of the United States" (WOTUS), arguing the rule was needed to clear up uncertainties in the wake of two U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

More than half of U.S. states sued EPA to have the rule overturned. The courts quickly issued regulatory stays on the Clean Water Rule, meaning it never really went into effect. Manufacturers, energy companies, farmers, ranchers and land developers said the Obama-era rule would only make it harder to do business and manage land.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order last year, asking EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to replace the Obama-era WOTUS rule with one consistent with former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's plurality opinion in the 2006 Rapanos v. United States case.

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EPA began the WOTUS repeal process in June and published a plan for WOTUS repeal in the Federal Register the following month. EPA's new submission clarifies some concerns stakeholders expressed last summer, but the details aren't clear because it's still under review.

"From day one, EPA and the Department of the Army have been committed to providing certainty and clarity to our state and tribal co-regulators and farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders across the country," an EPA spokeswoman told TheDCNF.

"After reviewing this input, EPA and the Army have decided to issue a supplemental proposal to provide the public with additional clarity on the scope of the agencies' efforts," the spokeswoman said.

The move comes after environmentalists published a memo related to Clean Water Act enforcement. The memo, obtained by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), detailed how Pruitt would reserve the final say on jurisdiction under the Clean Water Act that was formerly delegated to regional officers.

PEER lambasted Pruitt's "restore regulatory certainty" as a "crude Clean Water Act coup d'état."

"This action subjects safeguards for clean water across the U.S. to filtration through one politician's hands," PEER's New England Director Kyla Bennett said in a statement. "Every corporation that wants a pass on Clean Water Act compliance is invited to privately meet with the most user friendly EPA Administrator in history."

However, Pacific Legal Foundation attorney Jonathan Wood said the memo could "promote both consistency in application and more accountability." PLF has challenged WOTUS in federal court.

"As it stands now, it makes a huge difference which regional office reviews your case — and often which bureaucrat within the office you happen to draw," Wood told TheDCNF. "Centralizing final decision making should lead to more consistent decision-making."

"There's also an important accountability issue here," Wood said. "Clean Water Act decisions require a mix of science and policy judgment."

"As the person appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate to make those judgments, Pruitt can be forced to answer for the exercise of that policy-making power," Wood said. "When these decisions are made by anonymous regional bureaucrats, it is exponentially harder to hold anyone accountable."

CBS News

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/here-are-some-of-the-threats-made-against-epa-administrator-scott-pruitt/

Here Are Some Of The Threats Made Against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt

By Jacqueline Alemany, Arden Farhi, 4/11/18

CBS News has obtained an August 2017 report prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency's office of inspector general that contains a list of 13 threats made against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and his family.

The threats range in severity, credibility and specificity.

One tweet flagged by investigators said, "Pruitt, I'm gonna find you and put a bullet between your eyes. Don't think I'm joking. I'm planning this." Investigators believe the threat was made by someone living in India.

Another person wished the administrator "a very painful and horrible death through poisoning. Please explain the scientific method to this freaking neanderthal."

The inspector general also looked into a complaint that "unknown protesters attempted to disrupt the EPA Administrator's speech during a closed event." Another person emailed the EPA threatening to dump old paint outside Pruitt's door.

The threats took various forms -- some arriving via social media and email, others by postcard.

Pruitt's daughter received a menacing message on Facebook, the document reveals.

In certain cases, cases were referred to the Justice Department, but just one was deemed serious enough to prosecute. The report covers the period from Oct. 2016 to Aug. 2017.

EPA Spokesman Jahan Wilcox responded that Pruitt had faced "unprecedented" threats.

In an email to the EPA's "Threat Coordination Group," Patrick Sullivan, the assistant inspector general for investigations at the EPA outlined an incident that occurred on March 6, 2018, in which a trespasser gained entry to the EPA headquarters and identified himself as a student attending a "Microsoft event."

"The personal asked about Scott Pruitt and wanted to know where Pruitt's office was and if Pruitt ever walked in the hallway outside the room," wrote Sullivan.

The intruder was soon escorted out of the EPA but called the desk phone of an employee and left voicemails following the intrusion claiming "he can gain entry into EPA space anytime he wants."

The security vulnerability was soon thereafter investigated.

Wilcox told CBS News, "We do not comment on matters pertaining to EPA's IG." A spokesperson for the EPA inspector general had no comment.

In early March, Pruitt told CBS News, "The quantity and the type of threats I've faced are unprecedented."

The inspector general report also details threats made against EPA employees and facilities and two threats against Gina McCarthy, the EPA administrator under President Obama.

McCarthy's office received a series of hostile phone calls from a person who is currently being prosecuted for making "Felony Threats." The caller said, "I will kill ya'll (sic) and f*** up Gina McCarthy," according to the report.

Democratic Sens. Tom Carper, of Delaware, and Sheldon Whitehouse, of Rhode Island, released a letter on Tuesday to Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, chairman of the Senate committee that oversees the EPA, that said the assertions of "ongoing threats associated with the administrator's air travel" were inconsistent with an internal memo they obtained from a whistleblower at the EPA.

The memo, dated Feb. 14, 2018, according to the letter sent by Carper and Whitehouse, claimed that "EPA Intelligence has not identified any specific direct threat to the EPA administrator."

In a statement provided to the New York Times, Barrasso said that he Democrats had selectively released parts of the internal memo.

On Wednesday, Democratic senators held a press conference demanding answers from Pruitt about why he had ordered costly security measures and full time protection -- even on personal trips.

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Sen. Tom Udall, D-New Mexico, said Pruitt had committed some of the worst "ethical transgressions of the entire Trump administration."

"The list of abuses just keeps getting longer," Udall told reporters at the press conference. "Lavish first class flights around the world, swanky hotel stays, taxpayers footing the bill for personal trips to Oklahoma, a $43,000 soundproof phone booth in his office, taking 30 EPA enforcement officers away from investigating polluters to serve as his round the clock personal security detail, speeding down the streets of Washington with sirens and lights blaring to get to fancy restaurants, huge unauthorized salary raises for his friends, allowing a close aide not to come to work for three months while still getting paid, and finally detailing EPA staff to find him a place to live. These are just a few of the things he is doing."

As Udall sees it, "Scott Pruitt has misused taxpayer dollars while enhancing his own personal perks."

The AP first reported that Pruitt's 20-member full time security detail "approached $3 million when pay is added in travel expenses." But EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox defended the EPA administrator and said he has faced "unprecedented" threats.

The EPA administrator has been embroiled in scandal during his term, facing persistent rumors about the future of his job in the Trump administration. But he has also been called the president's most effective Cabinet secretary by Republican allies around Washington – including the president himself.

Last Thursday, the president praised Pruitt aboard Air Force One en route to Washington, calling him "a good man."

"I think he's done a fantastic job at EPA," Trump told reporters. "I think he's done an incredible job. He's been very courageous. Hasn't been easy, but I think he's done an absolutely fantastic job. I think he'll be fine."

The president added that the White House was looking into reports about Pruitt's ethical entanglements: he has not only come under fire for habitually traveling first class or by military jet at considerable taxpayer expense but he is now also is under investigation by House Oversight Committee Chairman Trey Gowdy for a housing arrangement in Washington, D.C., in 2017. ABC News first reported that Pruitt had lived in a Capitol Hill apartment owned by the wife of a fossil fuels lobbyist and rented the space for $50 a night – only paying for nights that he slept there.

Here are some of the documents obtained by CBS News:

CNN

https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/12/politics/andrew-wheeler-environmental-protection-agency-scott-pruitt-congress/index.html

Vote Slated For Thursday For Former Inhofe Aide Wheeler To Be EPA's No. 2

By Daniella Diaz and Ted Barrett, 4/12/18

The Senate is set to vote on Andrew Wheeler to be the number two official at the Environmental Protection Agency amid ethics concerns plaguing EPA chief Scott Pruitt and calls from Democrats for him to resign.

If Pruitt left, it could fall to Wheeler to run the agency until a new administrator is confirmed.

Two GOP leadership aides told CNN they expected Wheeler to be approved, which would make him the latest appointee at the agency with close ties to the energy industry.

His firm's clients include Murray Energy, which bills itself as "the largest coal mining company in America."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, blasted Wheeler as "a former industry lobbyist who has worked on behalf of big polluters and climate change deniers. He has spent years working to undermine or lobby against the environmental protections he may soon oversee."

Prior to his lobbying work, Wheeler served on Capitol Hill as a Republican staff member for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and as a top aide to Sen. Jim Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican and an outspoken climate change skeptic who told CNN last month the EPA is "brainwashing our kids."

New Mexico Democratic Sen. Tom Udall said Wednesday that Wheeler should be carefully vetted, as if he were taking over for Pruitt now. Udall told reporters that he believes Wheeler wouldn't be a much better option to run the agency.

"The problem with the Wheeler nomination is if Trump (fires Pruitt) tomorrow, Wheeler is in fact the administrator, and that is a very, very serious problem," Udall said. "I know that there are many Republicans who haven't spoken out yet, but privately they are very disturbed by what Scott Pruitt is doing at the EPA."

While there is widespread opposition to Wheeler in the Democratic caucus, two Democrats running for reelection from energy producing states that strongly backed President Donald Trump in 2016 have said they will vote for him: Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota.

"After meeting with Mr. Wheeler and reviewing his record, I've decided to support his nomination," Heitkamp said in a statement provided to CNN. "I believe he'll be open to working on issues important to North Dakota in a pragmatic and fair way, and I'll hold him accountable to make sure he implements the mission of the EPA in a way that works for my state."

One key centrist Republican has also signaled support for Wheeler.

"Mr. Wheeler has demonstrated that he understands the mission of the EPA and the role of Congress when it comes to oversight and accountability," said Maine Sen. Susan Collins in a statement.

Wheeler's nomination comes amid a steady stream of negative headlines involving Pruitt in recent weeks and months that has official Washington wondering whether the embattled agency chief can hold onto his job.

Most recently, Pruitt has been fighting stories revealing he paid about $6,100 over the course of a six-month lease last year to rent a room in a condo owned by Vicki Hart, a health care lobbyist whose husband, Steven Hart, has lobbied the EPA. His daughter also reportedly lived there while she was interning in Washington.

He paid $50 per night, according to the reports, and paid only for the nights he used the condo.

The federal government's top voice on ethics David Apol sent a letter to the agency outlining areas of concern regarding Pruitt. Apol, the acting director and general counsel of the Office of Government Ethics, summarized reports of Pruitt's conduct, including the rental agreement, as well as EPA spending on Pruitt's travel and security.

The letter also expresses concern with reports of Pruitt bypassing the White House to give raises to favored aides and other employees who faced job changes after raising concerns over his conduct.

Bloomberg

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-12/here-s-why-friends-and-foes-of-epa-chief-pruitt-are-so-adamant

Here's Why Friends And Foes Of EPA Chief Pruitt Are So Adamant

By Christopher Flavelle, Ari Natter, and Jennifer Dlouhy, 4/12/18

Supporters and detractors of Environmental Protection Agency head Scott Pruitt agree on this much: He matters.

Pruitt, whose continued tenure has been put in doubt by a series of ethics controversies, has attracted an extraordinary outpouring of support among conservative boosters who say he's the most effective member of President Donald Trump's cabinet. Likewise, the organizers of a "Boot Pruitt" movement see him as a serious risk to the environment he's supposed to be protecting.

Yet it is hard to assess Pruitt's tenure by traditional standards. Many of his high-profile initiatives, such as overturning the Obama administration's plan to curb carbon emissions from power plants, face years of legal challenges.

Nor can Pruitt's significance be tied to a roster of regulatory actions -- including those designed to jettison old rules. Federal data show that since Trump's inauguration, the agency has submitted nine "economically significant" rules, defined as those with likely economic impact of at least $100 million, to the White House for review. By comparison, the Department of Health and Human Services has produced 31 such rules, the Department of Labor six and the Department of the Interior five.

Narrow that list to the new rules that have actually been issued, and Pruitt's impact is even harder to spot. Of the 24 economically significant regulations that have been approved by the White House under President Donald Trump, just one was issued by the EPA, according to data posted by the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. And that rule set the amount of renewable fuels that must be used in 2018 -- a regulation the EPA must issue every year, regardless of who's in charge.

Those figures don't include regulations that were in the works when Pruitt arrived in Washington and that he has blocked.

EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox cited the agency's work to repeal Obama-era rules governing carbon dioxide emissions and water pollution as evidence Pruitt is advancing Trump's agenda.

"From advocating to leave the Paris Accord, working to repeal Obama's Clean Power Plan and Waters of the United States, declaring a war on lead and cleaning up toxic Superfund sites, Administrator Pruitt is focused on advancing President Trump's agenda of regulatory certainty and environmental stewardship," Wilcox said in an emailed statement.

A fuller assessment of Pruitt's 14 months in office shows that he's laid the groundwork for a wholesale revision of environmental policy, one that delights anti-regulatory groups and frightens environmentalists.

"Without a doubt, Scott Pruitt has been the single most effective appointment of the president of the United States," said Tim Huelskamp, president of the Heartland Institute, an industry-funded nonprofit that advocates for less regulation.

Vera Pardee, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity, shared that view, albeit from the opposite direction. "The deregulatory agenda of Trump finds its most destructive expression in Mr. Pruitt," she said.

That shared view of Pruitt's importance helps explain the effort that advocates have poured into keeping him in his job -- or getting him removed. The outpouring is far greater than was expended on behalf of other embattled cabinet members, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson or Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin who both ended up losing their jobs.

Pruitt has been dogged by a series of controversies, including expensive first-class tickets and 24-hour security details, hefty raises for aides and renting a Capitol Hill bedroom from a lobbyist for $50 a night. In response, environmentalists have mounted a campaign to seek Pruitt's ouster; advocates of smaller government, meanwhile, have set up a coordinated effort of their own to retain him at the EPA.

Both sides put Pruitt's effort to reduce the influence of academic scientists within the EPA near the top of their list of reasons why he matters. Pruitt has removed many of those scientists from advisory boards, replacing them with people who reflect the concerns of industries the EPA regulates.

Those boards are important. The Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, for example, helps establish ozone standards that the agency is required to implement.

JunkScience.com
Steven Milloy, publisher of the website JunkScience.com and a senior fellow at the Energy and Legal Institute, praised Pruitt for installing as chairmen of the Science Advisory Board and the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee "people I consider to be very strongly grounded in science."

Michael Halpern, deputy director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, echoed Milloy's point about the importance of those boards -- although he characterized Pruitt's appointments as "stacking" them.

Another point of agreement is Pruitt's changing the rules on so-called "secret science." He has directed the EPA to use only research whose underlying data is publicly available. Environmental advocates say that prevents the EPA from issuing air and water regulations supported by health research, since the identities of patients studied in those papers is kept private.

Huelskamp, of the Heartland Institute, praised that change. Halpern criticized it.

Pruitt also has made major policy pivots outside the formal rulemaking process. That includes the EPA's decision not to ban the commercial use of the pesticide chlorpyrifos and methylene chloride used in paint strippers. The EPA also has relaxed air pollution requirements via memos and internal opinions -- navigating around the federal rulemaking process in a way that has already drawn at least one legal challenge.

Environmental advocates also argue that Pruitt has restrained the EPA's willingness to fine polluters for violating the law.

"If you look at his enforcement record, it is disastrous and terrifying," said Lukas Ross, climate and energy advocate for Friends of the Earth. "It's not just the number of cases lodged, but it's also the amount of money that's been captured through lodging those cases."

Equally consequential, Ross added, are Pruitt's efforts to change the mission of the agency, in a way that will drive away staff who care about protecting the environment.

"There is a very real threat of brain drain because of the morale crisis being created by Scott Pruitt," Ross said. "If I worked at the EPA, I would be thinking about quitting too."

On that point as well, Milloy, the Junk Science publisher, agreed.

"Are these people sad?" Milloy asked. "The rest of America is happy."

The Washington Times

https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/apr/12/here-are-legitimate-death-threats-against-scott-pr/

Here Are The Legitimate Death Threats Against Scott Pruitt That Dems Claim Don't Exist

By Larry O'Connor, 4/12/18

One of the more sickening episodes of the full-court press by members of The Swamp against EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt is the claim that he has spent too much money on extravagant security details.

Democrats in the Senate have questioned the legitimacy of death threats against Pruitt and his family and have demanded hearings to investigate the matter:

Two top Democrats on the committee, ranking member Thomas R. Carper of Delaware and Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, on Tuesday demanded such hearings, saying they have confidential documents that contradict public statements made by Pruitt, EPA spokespersons and President Donald Trump regarding the administrator's security spending.

The lawmakers in their letter asserted that the documents in their hands fall far short of supporting claims by Pruitt's office that he needed elaborate security measure to protect him from death threats.

"Documents provided to us by EPA official(s) suggest the agency has relied on questionable threats to the Administrator, including reports of non-violent protests, negative feedback about the administrators actions or other First Amendment protected activity to justify millions of dollars in additional security spending, inducing first-class air travel, as compared to his predecessors at the agency," Carper and Whitehouse wrote.

This is how vicious the opposition to Pruitt has become. As if a person would go out of their way to have an obtrusive and heavy-handed security detail for no good reason.

CBS News has obtained (probably from staffers at the EPA hoping to push back on the despicable narrative from Senate Democrats) documentation on just some of the death threats against Pruitt that had been detailed in August 2017 and, no, the threats are not isolated to anonymous tweets:

In an email to the EPA's "Threat Coordination Group," Patrick Sullivan, the assistant inspector general for investigations at the EPA outlined an incident that occurred on March 6, 2018, in which a trespasser gained entry to the EPA headquarters and identified himself as a student attending a "Microsoft event."

"The person asked about Scott Pruitt and wanted to know where Pruitt's office was and if Pruitt ever walked in the hallway outside the room," wrote Sullivan.
The intruder was soon escorted out of the EPA but called the desk phone of an employee and left voicemails following the intrusion claiming "he can gain entry into EPA space anytime he wants."

The security vulnerability was soon thereafter investigated.

McCarthy's office received a series of hostile phone calls from a person who is currently being prosecuted for making "Felony Threats." The caller said, "I will kill ya'll (sic) and f*** up Gina McCarthy," according to the report.

The Daily Caller also has a summary of some of the threats Pruitt has had to deal with presumably from global warming enthusiasts who care more about carbon emission hysteria than they do human life:

Investigators flagged one tweet that stated: "Pruitt, I'm gonna find you and put a bullet between your eyes. Don't think I'm joking. I'm planning this." Investigators determined the threat came from someone living in India. The investigation is ongoing.

These types of threats were a common occurrence, the report notes.

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For instance, another person mailed a postcard to Pruitt telling him to "get out while you still can, Scott, you are evil incarnate you ignorant fuck." An investigation was unable to determine who sent the message. The case was not presented to the United States Attorney's Office for prosecution.

Pruitt's opponents hate how effective he has been (as we detailed last week) and they hate that President Trump has stood by him in the face of unfair and duplicitous attacks against his ethics and credibility. But to question the cost of his security detail for partisan purposes is beyond the pale.

It's time for Senate Republicans to unequivocally stand behind Pruitt and publicly shame these Democrats for their unprecedented attacks. They are even going out of their way to minimize real and credible threats against a man's wife and against innocent government workers.

It's time for a Joseph Welch moment. "Have you no decency? At long last, have you no shame?"

The Washington Free Beacon

http://freebeacon.com/blog/breaking-liberals-suddenly-care-wasting-taxpayer-money/

Breaking: Liberals Suddenly Care About Wasting Taxpayer Money

By Elizabeth Harrington, 4/11/18

I suddenly have a lot of competition covering my beat. Who knew the mainstream media cared how our taxpayer dollars are wasted?

Security costs for cabinet secretaries are "steep." Spending is "lavish" again. When, God forbid, a secretary takes his wife with him on a business trip, CNN is there with the documents in hand, showing her "involvement."

The New York Times is now giving tips on how to save taxpayers money, while lambasting Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's use of military charter flights. (Mnuchin's travel ended up costing half of what Obama administration secretaries spent on average. Oddly, the Times never followed up.)

The latest target is Scott Pruitt, arguably President Trump's most effective cabinet secretary. While there is questionable conduct for sure, like using an obscure law to give aides huge taxpayer-funded raises, it's curious the media suddenly care how much international junkets cost.

The first scandal that caught the press's attention was Pruitt's trip to Italy last summer to attend the G-7 summit, which cost $84,000 in airfare and security, roughly the same that Lisa Jackson, Obama's first EPA administrator, spent on average on flights and security for four international trips.

The headlines for Jackson's trip to the same summit in Syracuse, Italy, in early 2009 were slightly different.

The Times has hit Pruitt for his "extravagant spending" on private flights and 24-hour security. But not too long ago it was the Times defending lavish trips on the taxpayer's dime.

"There is nothing like a little Mediterranean beach vacation to unwind," the Times wrote back in August 2010. Do tell.

"Unless you happen to travel with dozens of Secret Service agents, trailed by photographers and dogged by controversy."

Ah, poor Michelle Obama. She just wanted to get away, but those mean Republicans had to spoil her vacation.

"Michelle Obama hoped to enjoy a quiet summer break in southern Spain with her younger daughter and a few friends," the Times wrote. "But the Andalusian getaway has gotten away from her as the European media document her every flamenco dance step and critics back home question the wisdom of such a lavish vacation, which involves at least some taxpayer money, in a time of austerity."

"At least some" turned into a measly $467,585, including $26,670.61 for a "chauffeur tour of Costa del Sol."

The Times wrote approvingly of Mrs. Obama and "her entourage" touring the "picturesque southern city of Ronda," and hobnobbing with Eva Longoria Parker and Antonio Banderas.

Besides, reports on the trips "had been exaggerated," the Times said.

"Mrs. Obama is not traveling with 40 friends," the Times assured us. It was only "two friends and four of their daughters, as well as a couple of aides and a couple of advance staff members."

It was no big deal for Mrs. Obama and friends to stay at the five-star Hotel Villa Padierna, where "at least 30 rooms were reserved for the entourage."

"The hotel is one of Spain's more luxurious establishments, with rooms ranging from $500-a-night to a $6,600 suite with 24-hour butler service," the Times wrote.

"While some Americans frown," the Times concluded, "the Spanish eagerly welcomed the Obama group, seeing it as a boost for a tourism sector severely hit by the country's economic downturn."

It might not have been great for the taxpayers, but it was good for Spain!

It wasn't just the first lady's taxpayer-funded trips the media were either uninterested in covering or eager to defend. It was the entire Obama cabinet.

In fact, then-congressman Barney Frank had to apologize for scrutinizing Timothy Geitner's use of military charter flights, which cost at least $150,000 for international trips and totaled "several million dollars a year."

The only Obama official who came close to scrutiny from the mainstream media was Attorney General Eric Holder, who along with his predecessor Michael Mukasey and former FBI director Robert Mueller, now the special counsel, spent over $11 million on taxpayer-funded private jets for personal travel.

Holder used the FBI's private Gulfstream V to go to the Super Bowl in New Orleans in 2013, costing $15,000 each way.

Holder alone spent $4.3 million on travel in three years, including 31 personal trips and "two jaunts to Martha's Vineyard that totaled $95,184 in flight expenses."

Tom Price was ousted from the Department of Health and Human Services for far less.

The media didn't report on Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz's travel costs either, which lasted up until 11 days before Trump's inauguration. Who knows how much it cost us for Moniz to travel to Mexico City on January 9, 2017, to sign a "non-binding" document on electricity grids.

Republicans shouldn't be hypocrites, careless, or both, when it comes to how they spend our money. But let's not kid ourselves by pretending the media actually cares.

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Reuters

https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biofuels/trump-administration-weighs-high-ethanol-fuel-waiver-to-placate-farmers-idUSKBN1HI3EU

Trump administration weighs high-ethanol fuel waiver to placate farmers

By Jarrett Renshaw and Chris Prentice, 4/11/18, 7:20 PM

NEW YORK (Reuters) - The Trump administration is considering allowing the sale of a higher ethanol fuel blend in the summer, a source familiar with the issue said, a move that would placate corn growers worried about the future of U.S. biofuels policy.

President Donald Trump recently met with the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to discuss ways to make the Renewable Fuel Standard less expensive to the oil industry without undercutting demand for ethanol.

The RFS requires refiners to add increasing volumes of biofuels like corn-based ethanol into the nation's fuel supply each year which is a boon to farmers but a headache for refining companies that must either blend the fuels themselves or purchase credits from those who do.

Trump has tried in vain over the past several months to broker a deal between "Big Oil" and "Big Corn" over the issue, and has faced mounting pressure from lawmakers in the Midwest who are concerned that he will weaken domestic demand for ethanol at a time farmers are already facing a potential trade war with China that could hurt export demand for corn and soybeans.

Sources had told Reuters this week that Trump was temporarily suspending his consideration of a refining industry-backed proposal to cap prices for blending credits, an idea that the biofuels industry has opposed as damaging to farmers.

But in the meantime, the administration is considering moving forward with plans to allow for the ethanol industry's long sought waiver to sell gasoline containing 15 percent ethanol in the summer, instead of the usual 10 percent blend, the source familiar with the issue told Reuters on Wednesday.

The higher ethanol blend, called E15, is currently banned by the Environmental Protection Agency due to concerns it contributes to smog on hot days, a worry that biofuels advocates say is baseless. If done soon, the waiver could be in effect in time for the 2018 summer driving season.

EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman did not immediately respond to a request for comment. White House spokeswoman Kelly Love did not comment on the E15 waiver but said that during Trump's meeting Monday he "instructed his Cabinet to continue to explore options that protect American farmers and America's refinery workers."

Biofuels proponents have heaped pressure on the White House after reports that the EPA was granting dozens of small refineries exemptions from the RFS to help them avoid the costs of compliance, something the ethanol industry says will weaken demand for their product.

On Monday, Trump acknowledged farmers may bear the brunt of the economic harm if China retaliates against Washington's threat of tariffs, noting that "we'll make it up to them". Many U.S. farmers are battling debt after years of excess global supplies and depressed prices.

"We need some good news out here," said Monte Shaw, the Executive Director of the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association.

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"The best news (Trump) could give us right now is year-round sales of E15," he said.

City Journal

https://www.city-journal.org/html/scott-pruitt-warrior-science-15821.html

Scott Pruitt, Warrior for Science

By John Tierney, 4/11/18

Imagine if the head of a federal agency announced a new policy for its scientific research: from now on, the agency would no longer allow its studies to be reviewed and challenged by independent scientists, and its researchers would not share the data on which their conclusions were based. The response from scientists and journalists would be outrage. By refusing peer review from outsiders, the agency would be rejecting a fundamental scientific tradition. By not sharing data with other researchers, it would be violating a standard transparency requirement at leading scientific journals. If a Republican official did such a thing, you'd expect to hear denunciations of this latest offensive in the "Republican war on science."

That's the accusation being hurled at Scott Pruitt, the Republican who heads the Environmental Protection Agency. But Pruitt hasn't done anything to discourage peer review. In fact, he's done the opposite: he has called for the use of more independent experts to review the EPA's research and has just announced that the agency would rely only on studies for which data are available to be shared. Yet Democratic officials and liberal journalists have denounced these moves as an "attack on science," and Democrats have cited them (along with accusations of ethical violations) in their campaign to force Pruitt out of his job.

How could "the party of science," as Democrats like to call themselves, be opposed to transparency and peer review? Because better scientific oversight would make it tougher for the EPA to justify its costly regulations. To environmentalists, rigorous scientific protocols are fine in theory, but not in practice if they interfere with the green political agenda. As usual, the real war on science is the one waged from the left.

The EPA has been plagued by politicized science since its inception in 1970. One of its first tasks was to evaluate the claim, popularized in Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, that the use of DDT pesticide was causing an epidemic of cancer. The agency held extensive hearings that led to the conclusion that DDT was not a carcinogen, a finding that subsequent research would confirm. Yet the EPA administrator, William Ruckelshaus, reportedly never even bothered to read the scientific testimony. Ignoring the thousands of pages of evidence, he declared DDT a potential carcinogen and banned most uses of it.

Since then, the agency has repeatedly been criticized for relying on weak or cherry-picked evidence to promote needless alarms justifying the expansion of its authority (and budget). Its warnings about BPA, a chemical used in plastics, were called unscientific by leading researchers in the field. Its conclusion that secondhand smoke was killing thousands of people annually was ruled by a judge to be in violation of "scientific procedure and norms"—and was firmly debunked by later research.

To justify the costs of the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan restricting coal-burning power plants, the EPA relied on a controversial claim that a particular form of air pollution (from small particulates) was responsible for large numbers of premature deaths. To reach that conclusion, the agency ignored contradictory evidence and chose to rely on 1990s research whose methodology and conclusions were open to question. The EPA's advisory committee on air pollution, a group of outside scientists, was sufficiently concerned at the time to ask to see the supporting data. But the researchers and the EPA refused to share the data, citing the confidentiality of the medical records involved, and they have continued refusing demands from Congress and other researchers to share it, as Steve Milloy recounts in his book, Scare Pollution: Why and How to Fix the EPA.

Pruitt's new policy will force the EPA to rely on studies for which data is available to other researchers, ensuring the transparency that enables findings to be tested and confirmed. So why is he being attacked? His critics argue that some worthwhile research will be ignored because it is based on confidential records that are impractical to share. They say that it would cost the EPA several hundred million dollars to redact personal medical information in the air-pollution studies used to justify the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan. But even if that estimate is correct—it seems awfully high—it's a pittance compared with the costs of the EPA's regulations. The Obama EPA estimated the annual cost of its Clean Power Plan at $8 billion; others estimated it at more than $30 billion. Before saddling utility customers with those higher bills year after year, the EPA could at least pay for reliable research.

Pruitt's critics have also excoriated him for insisting that the EPA's advisory boards consist of independent scientists, ending the practice of including researchers who receive grants from the agency—exactly the sort of conflict of interest that progressives object to when researchers receive money from private industry. He has also proposed an analysis of climate change using a "red-team/blue-team" exercise, an innovative technique that has been used to draw up plans at the Defense Department and the CIA and by private industry for industrial operations and projects such as designing spacecraft. A group of outside experts, the red team, is brought in to critique the work of the in-house blue team, which then responds, and the teams keep going back and forth, under the supervision of a moderator. It's an enhanced form of peer review, forcing researchers and bureaucrats to defend or reconsider their ideas, and ideally leading to sounder conclusions and better plans. A version of this exercise has already been used to bolster the case for man-made global warming, as noted by Joseph Majkut of the Niskanen Institute.

Given the high stakes and the many uncertainties related to climate change—the dozens of computer climate models, the widely varying estimates of costs and benefits of mitigation strategies—who could object to studying the problem carefully? Yet Pruitt's proposal has been denounced by Democrats as well as liberal Republicans like Christine Whitman, the former New Jersey governor, who argued that the facts are so well-established that further examination is unnecessary. As a former head of the EPA, Whitman no doubt appreciates how much easier it is to make regulations without the nuisance of debate. But what's good for bureaucrats is not good for science.

The Wall Street Journal

https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weekly-jobless-claims-hold-below-300-000-for-longest-streak-on-record-1523536549

U.S. Weekly Jobless Claims Hold Below 300,000 For Longest Streak On Record

By Sarah Chaney, 4/12/18

WASHINGTON—The number of Americans claiming new unemployment benefits has never been so low for so long.

Initial jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs across the U.S., decreased by 9,000 to a seasonally adjusted 233,000 in the week ended April 7, the Labor Department said Thursday. This means claims have now held below 300,000 for 162 consecutive weeks, cementing the longest streak for weekly records dating back to 1967.

The current streak eclipsed the previous longest stretch that ended in April 1970.

The consistently low claims levels point to labor market health because they mean relatively few Americans are losing their jobs and applying for benefits to tide them over until they can find new employment.

After several years of consistent job growth, firms are reluctant to let employees go in a tightening labor market in which many available workers are quickly snapped up.

"Even if you aren't aggressively hiring, if you know the labor market is tight and it's going to be difficult to hire someone…you're only going to lay someone off if you had to," said Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont Securities.

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Data on jobless claims can be volatile from week to week, especially around holidays when seasonal adjustments can be tricky.

"The changing date of the Easter holiday from year to year makes the seasonal adjustment process tricky from late March through late April, so further volatility in headline claims over the next few weeks can't be ruled out," wrote Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, in a note to clients.

The four-week moving average of initial claims, a more-stable measure, increased last week to 230,000.

The low level of claims is among multiple signs of health in the U.S. labor market. The unemployment rate has held at 4.1% since October, its lowest level since late 2000. Employers have added to nonfarm payrolls for 90 straight months in the longest continuous jobs expansion on record.

Thursday's report showed the number of claims workers made for longer than a week increased by 53,000 to 1,871,000 in the week ended March 31. That figure, known as continuing claims, is reported with a one-week lag.

The Washington Post

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/russia-seeks-to-allay-fears-of-open-conflict-with-the-us-over-syria/2018/04/12/2d2407c4-3e38-11e8-8d53-eba0ed2371cc_story.html?utm_term=.587c5a0bc9a8

As Fears Mount Over Open U.S.-Russia Conflict, Moscow Seeks To Lower The Temperature

By Anton Troianovski, Louisa Loveluck, 4/12/18

MOSCOW — Russian officials on Thursday sought to tamp down public fears of a looming conflict with the United States, even as Syrian government forces took control of the town where they are suspected of carrying out a chemical attack last weekend.

Russian military police also entered Douma on Thursday to act as "guarantors of law and order in the town," the Russian Defense Ministry said, according to Russian news agencies. Russian troops had arrived earlier Monday under the terms of a surrender deal reached with the rebels after the suspected chemical attack — which Russia and Syria say did not happen.

The recapture of Douma, in the region of Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, effectively represents the end of the war between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the rebel groups opposing his rule. Although chunks of the country remain under opposition control, none are as symbolic as Eastern Ghouta.

But the situation in Syria remained in flux ahead of an anticipated airstrike by the United States, which President Trump has signaled he plans to carry out in response to the suspected use of chemical weapons by Assad's forces.

Trump appeared to moderate his tone with a tweet early Thursday, saying he did not mean to suggest that missile strikes are imminent.

"Never said when an attack on Syria would take place," he tweeted. "Could be very soon or not so soon at all!"

A spokesman for the Kremlin told reporters Thursday that Russia is watching the American declarations closely.

"We continue to believe that it is extremely important to avoid any steps that may lead to an increase of tensions in Syria," Dmitry Peskov said.

Russian officials in recent days had warned of the possibility of a direct military confrontation with the United States as a result of a U.S. strike. Any missile attack that puts Russian lives at risk, Moscow has said, would result in Russia striking back at the missiles and at the planes or ships that launched them.

Russia has deployed air defense systems in Syria, including its sophisticated S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile system. The fact that thousands of Russian troops and military advisers are stationed across the country means there's a chance that a large-scale U.S. strike on Syrian government forces would — deliberately or not — also kill Russians, military analysts in Moscow say.

In the wake of Trump's Wednesday tweet warning Russia of a planned U.S. missile strike, however, Moscow appears to be trying to make clear that it does not want a war and that a limited attack that doesn't risk Russian lives would not precipitate a military response.

Moscow bureau chief Anton Troianovski describes Russia's tensions with the U.S. and how state media are covering the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria. (Sarah Parnass, Anton Troianovski/The Washington Post)

"I rule out a scenario in which the United States will intentionally strike a facility in Syria where Russian servicemen are located," Military Sciences Academy Vice President Sergei Modestov said in Thursday's edition of the government newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta.

The Kommersant newspaper quoted anonymous Defense Ministry sources as saying that Russia's General Staff was in touch with the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and expected to receive coordinates on airstrike targets from the Pentagon to avoid Russian casualties.

"Right now, the talk is about the necessity of de-escalation," said Alexander Golts, an independent military analyst in Moscow. "We've practically come to the brink of war."

On the ground, fighters from the hard-line Jaish al-Islam group have trickled out of Douma in recent days under the terms of a deal that followed Saturday's suspected chemical attack. Local residents said Wednesday that the militants had insisted on emptying their magazines into the air instead of handing them to the Syrian military, and that they wounded civilians in the process.

But by Thursday morning, a monitoring group reported that they had surrendered their weapons altogether. Russia says that more than 13,000 militants and their families have left Douma since April 1.

Negotiations for the group's withdrawal had taken months, stalling and resuming as the fighting ebbed and flowed. But Jaish al-Islam's political chief said Thursday that the suspected chemical attacks had been the final straw.

"Of course, the chemical attack is what pushed us to agree," Yasser Dalwan told the Agence France-Presse news agency.

The World Health Organization has said that during the shelling of Douma on Saturday, about 500 patients exhibited "signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals."

A network of local flight monitors said they had tracked several helicopters heading southwest from a government air base on Saturday evening. The same models of aircraft were then seen circling over Douma at 7:26 p.m. and 7:38 p.m.

Reports of a suspected gas attack began circulating minutes later. In one apartment block, rescuers would later find rooms filled with tangled bodies and the stench of chlorine. Some people had died foaming at the mouth, according to video footage.

Russia, however, says that its specialists who have visited Douma have found no evidence of a chemical attack. Instead, Saturday's incident represented the latest example of rebel trying to stage such an attack to undermine the Assad regime, Lt. Gen. Viktor Poznikhir, deputy chief of operations of the Russian General Staff, said Wednesday.

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Rebel supporters on Saturday "once again tried to imitate in front of video cameras a staged chemical attack on civilians in the town of Douma," he said.

TRUMP TWEETS

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 4h

Good luck to Mike Pompeo during his Confirmation Hearing today. He will be a great Secretary of State!

5.9K 6.0K 29K

Show this thread

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 4h

Never said when an attack on Syria would take place. Could be very soon or not so soon at all! In any event, the United States, under my Administration, has done a great job of ridding the region of ISIS. Where is our "Thank you America?"

29K 14K 55K

Show this thread

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 4h

California Governor Jerry Brown is doing the right thing and sending the National Guard to the Border. Thank you Jerry, good move for the safety of our Country!

4.3K 8.1K 45K

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 4h

If I wanted to fire Robert Mueller in December, as reported by the Failing New York Times, I would have fired him. Just more Fake News from a biased newspaper!

10K 10K 45K

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