Message

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To: Dravis, Samantha [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=ece53f0610054e669d9dffe0b3a842df-Dravis, Sam]
Subject: Morning Energy: Another mess for Pruitt — Virgin Islands party boss: Zinke ties improved hurricane response — Coal magnate delivered draft orders to Trump

By Kelsey Tamborrino | 06/07/2018 05:41 AM EDT

With help from Darius Dixon, Anthony Adragna and Annie Snider

ANOTHER MESS FOR PRUITT: Scott Pruitt has an appetite for food from the White House mess — a U.S. Navy-run restaurant for use only by White House officials, Cabinet members and other dignitaries. In fact, he loves eating there so much, the White House asked him to stop coming by so often, POLITICO's Emily Holden, Andrew Restuccia and Anthony Adragna report.

The message was clear, according to one person close to Pruitt: "We love having Mr. Pruitt, but it's not meant for everyday use." A member of the White House's Cabinet affairs team told agency chiefs of staff last year that their bosses shouldn't treat the mess like their personal dining hall — a comment that came in response to Pruitt's recurring use of the restaurant, sources said.

Pruitt's allies privately disputed that the warning about overuse of the mess was aimed squarely at him, but nobody contests that he's a frequent presence at the establishment in the basement of the West Wing. The White House did not respond when asked about his lunch habits, and EPA declined to comment.

A billing statement from July 2017 offered a glimpse into Pruitt's trips to the mess, racking up a bill of $400 over nine trips that month — a relative bargain in downtown Washington considering the menu. A cheeseburger at the White House runs just $6.35, according to Pruitt's bill. Compare that to the $17 you'd pay for a burger from another favorite Pruitt spot, French bistro Le Diplomate. Read more.

Support for Pruitt is also falling on Capitol Hill, Anthony and Emily report, in the wake of this week's news that Pruitt sought to buy a used mattress from the Trump Hotel and inquired about securing a Chick-fil-A franchise for his wife. Two more top aides to Pruitt — scheduler Millan Hupp and counsel Sarah Greenwalt — also are leaving the agency. "I'm not going to come down here, just because he happens to be a nominee of a president I support or a nominee from my party, and try to defend the indefensible," Sen. John Neely Kennedy said. More here.

On the other hand, Cory Gardner, who heads the Senate GOP campaign arm, told reporters he doesn't think Pruitt's ongoing ethics woes will harm his party in the midterms. "The states like Missouri, Indiana, North Dakota have benefited from a regulatory approach this administration has taken," Gardner said.

Environmentalists' "Boot Pruitt" campaign will gather a "group of cows" outside the Capitol South Metro station today from 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m. to hand out fake Chick-fil-A coupons for a free chicken sandwich with a donation to Pruitt's legal defense fund. They'll hold signs reading: "Breeth Mor Carbun" and "What the Cluck, Pruitt?"

VIRGIN ISLANDS BOSS PLAYS UP ZINKE RELATIONSHIP: The head of the Virgin Islands Republican Party suggested his fundraising group's longstanding relationship with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke helped improve the department's response to last year's hurricanes that struck the island territory, Pro's

Ben Lefebvre reports. John Canegata said he had direct access to Interior officials after the storm thanks to money his group raised for Zinke when he was a member of Congress.

Calling Zinke a "close friend," Canegata boasted of his connections in a televised appearance that aired in the Virgin Islands last month but has not received widespread attention outside of the territory. While numerous officials played a role in helping the islands recover from hurricanes Maria and Irma, "behind the scenes, trust me, a lot of telephone calls, a lot of maneuvering was going on because, I think, some of the relationships we built," Canegata said of Zinke.

Interior acknowledged that officials contacted Canegata after the hurricanes but said they did so as part of a wider effort to contact business leaders based in the territory and Zinke did not call him personally. Canegata works for Cruzan Rum, but a company representative told Ben he was not involved in coordinating its relief efforts. Interior expedited the reimbursement of taxes on Virgin Islands rum following the storms, but it was unclear whether Canegata influenced that decision; he did not respond to a request for comment.

For his part, Zinke has known Canegata since at least 2015, Ben reports. The secretary previously came under fire for a fundraiser for the VIGOP, as the group is known, during an official trip to the islands in his first month in President Donald Trump's Cabinet. Read more.

IT'S THURSDAY! I'm your host Kelsey Tamborrino. NRECA's Dan Riedinger correctly identified John Tyler as the only president to have not been a resident of the U.S. when he died. Tyler resided in Virginia at the time, which was part of the Confederate States of America. Today's question: Which Congress had the largest number of veterans in office? Send your tips, energy gossip and comments to ktamborrino@politico.com, or follow us on Twitter @kelseytam, @Morning_Energy and @POLITICOPro.

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MURRAY DELIVERED EXECUTIVE ORDERS TO TRUMP: Coal magnate Bob Murray handed off drafts of six executive orders that would roll back Obama-era environmental regulations to Trump during the beginning of his administration, according to documents from DOE released under FOIA. The documents include a letter to Energy Secretary Rick Perry from Murray praising Trump's March 2017 energy independence executive order, and included a note where Murray wrote, "we have developed the enclosed materials for your review and consideration, consisting of: six (6) Executive Orders further rescinding anti-coal regulations of the Obama administration; and one (1) memorandum outlining the legal rationale for each of these action, and others."

While Trump did not sign those exact orders, the administration has moved to enact similar policies, Pro's Darius Dixon reports. The documents, which were sent to DOE the day Trump signed his energy independence order and one day before Murray met with Perry and DOE chief of staff Brian McCormack, also included concepts about grid security and "resiliency" that Perry later touted as part of his push to stop coal power plants from closing. Read more.

BAILOUT ON HIS MIND: In private remarks given during his visit to FEMA headquarters Wednesday, Trump mentioned a slew of topics that had nothing to do with hurricanes, The Washington Post reports, while only briefly mentioning Puerto Rico. Trump instead encouraged Perry to make an announcement about rescuing economically struggling coal and nuclear power plants, the Post reports. "I'd love to put it out — 'clean coal, nuclear,' it's a very important message," he said, telling Perry he needed to hold a news conference.

WRDA MOVES AHEAD: The House passed the Water Resources Development Act of 2018 (H.R. 8 (115)) last night, marking the first major piece of infrastructure legislation to move under the Trump administration, Pro's Annie Snider reports. Lawmakers signed off on the measure on a broadly bipartisan vote of 408-2. The bill — markedly narrower than the Senate's measure — would authorize six new Army Corps of Engineers projects and enact a suite of policy reforms at the red tape-laden agency.

What about the Senate? For those wondering, EPW Chairman John Barrasso told ME he'd not yet locked down a time for the Senate to consider its broader version of the water resources infrastructure legislation. Separately, Sen. Tammy Baldwin sent this letter to Trump, calling on him to urge Congress to include a permanent Buy America provision in the legislation.

MUM'S THE WORD: Barrasso, whose state produces a lot of coal and uranium, told ME he isn't ready to back Trump's proposed bailout for coal and nuclear power plants. "I've read the article but I want to actually see what the proposal is," he said. DOE is still formulating the details of how it would intervene to save the struggling plants.

RESCISSIONS VOTE TODAY: The House is set to vote today on Trump's $15 billion rescissions bill, Pro's Sarah Ferris reports. The House Rules Committee teed up the bill, H.R. 3 (115), on Wednesday, a quick turnaround that surprised even some GOP lawmakers.

ALL ABOARD: After the rescissions package, the House is ready to start debate on its "minibus" appropriations package, which includes energy and water, legislative branch and military construction-VA spending bills, Pro's Kaitlyn Burton reports. The Rules Committee has set up floor votes on 50 amendments to the energy and water title. A final vote on the overall bill is expected Friday.

SHIMKUS SPEAKS: Rep. John Shimkus, one of the most ardent Yucca Mountain champions in Congress, said his loud floor dispute with Paul Ryan on Tuesday was simply a dispute over "strategy going forward." Other members suggested it had to do with the timing of the Energy-Water bill, since Shimkus thinks delaying until after the midterms might allow Yucca language to make it into the title. The Senate has avoided tackling Yucca due to Sen. Dean Heller's close reelection contest.

POWER OF THE PEN: The House Appropriations Committee agreed to bar EPA from spending more than $50 on a fountain pen. The amendment — an apparent reference to the $1,560 Pruitt spent on a dozen fancy writing implements — passed on a voice vote at Wednesday's markup. The panel cleared its version of the fiscal 2019 EPA-Interior bill, on a vote of 25-20. Committee Republicans blocked an effort from Democrats to boost EPA's Office of Inspector General by $12 million, but approved an amendment that would change revenue sharing for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And while the pen amendment passed, the committee shot down another amendment from Democratic Rep. Mike Quigley related to Pruitt's travel.

MEETING WITH A FULL DECK: The last time the leadership of FERC and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission got together, there were just enough commissioners between the two agencies to fill one five-member board. Fast-forward to today, and it's a full house for the first time in years thanks to confirmation of two new NRC leaders last month. The get-together is slated to run for just over two hours. An agenda hasn't been released but the meetings usually involve staff presentations on grid reliability — and how it might be impacted by the retirement of nuclear plants — and cybersecurity regulations. Finding the areas where an

economic regulator overlaps with a safety watchdog isn't always obvious. The meeting is slated to run from 9 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. at FERC headquarters, and will be webcast.

ROYALTY RUMPUS: Interior's Royalty Policy Committee approved recommendations Wednesday aimed at expanding energy lease sales and lowering royalty rates, Ben recaps. But during the advisory committee's meeting, two members questioned whether it had the power to suggest changes to federal environmental review. "NEPA is not referred to in the [committee] charter," Rod Eggert, a professor at the Colorado School of Mines, said during the meeting. "The text in the charter refers to royalties and collections of royalties." Read more here.

Later Wednesday, BLM sent out a memo instructing field offices to look for ways to speed up permit processing, including by using categorical exclusions, Ben reports.

— **Meanwhile, the Central Arizona Project will meet today** on proposals for sourcing cheaper power to run the Navajo Generating Station. The Bureau of Land Reclamation last week sought to delay the coal-fired power plant's closure, arguing that a 1968 law gives Zinke the authority to require the Arizona water project buy energy from the power plant. Reuters has the rundown here.

GROUPS WARY OF INTERIOR DRAFT BILL: A coalition of sportsmen's groups is concerned about draft legislation that appeared before the House Natural Resources Energy Subcommittee on Wednesday. According to the draft bill, it would enable Interior to recover the costs of administrative protests to oil and gas lease sales, drilling permits and other applications. The bill, they say, would make it more difficult for sportsmen and women to comment on oil and gas lease sales on public land.

BLANKENSHIP IS BACK: Former coal baron Don Blankenship hasn't given up hope to take on the establishment and earn himself a spot in the Senate. After losing a primary bid to West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, Blankenship's campaign announced Wednesday it is petitioning to gain ballot access for the general election as the nominee for the Constitution Party.

BIPARTISAN LETTER ASKS PRUITT TO DROP 'SECRET SCIENCE': More than 100 lawmakers — including Republican Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, Carlos Curbelo, Ryan Costello and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen — signed onto a letter to Pruitt today, asking him to withdraw EPA's so-called secret science proposal to bar EPA from using studies that don't make public all their data. Read the letter here.

DEMS WARN AGAINST E15: Democratic Sens. Tom Udall and Peter Welch are calling on EPA to abide "by all legal and regulatory requirements" as the Trump administration weighs the year-round sale of 15 percent ethanol blends of gasoline. "We are very concerned that career EPA officials may be being directed to reverse over 25 years of the agency's position to manufacture legal and scientific justifications for a politically-directed decision on E15," they write. Read the letter.

MAIL CALL! RELEASE THE STUDY: A coalition of environmental groups will send this letter today to HHS Secretary Alex Azar, calling on him to release the controversial federal chemical pollution study blocked by EPA officials.

— **Nineteen environmental groups filed a letter** to the House in opposition of H.R. 5895 (115), the so-called minibus, which they say sets up an improper use of water and natural resources, and undermines safe nuclear waste disposal. Read it here.

FOR YOUR RADAR: The International Wildlife Conservation Council, which came under fire for the big-game trophy hunters added to its ranks, will hold its next meeting June 19 in Atlanta, according to the Federal Register.

ON THE WEB: The Center for American Progress is launching a new website today that is dedicated to tracking legal challenges to the Trump administration's conservation agenda. See it here.

QUICK HITS

— The heat is back on high: May smashes U.S. temperature records, Associated Press.

— Man dies at Randolph County mine, Charleston Gazette-Mail.

— Hurricanes are traveling more slowly — which makes them even more dangerous, The Washington Post.

— Trump falsely claims "We're now exporting energy for the first time," The New York Times.

— Trump's move to please farmers on biofuels reform draws refinery union ire, Reuters.

HAPPENING TODAY

8:00 a.m. — Exchange Monitor holds Decommissioning Strategy Forum, Nashville

8:30 a.m. —New Energy Update holds U.S. Offshore Wind conference, Boston

9:00 a.m. — The Atlantic Council and the American Council on Renewable Energy discussion on "The State of America's Energy Transition: Renewable Energy Policy Network for the 21st Century Renewable Global Status Report," 1030 15th Street NW

9:00 a.m. — Industry Exchange holds Mexico Gas Summit, San Antonio, Texas

9:00 a.m. — The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission joint meeting, 888 First Street NE

11:00 a.m. — House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on "Improving the Hydropower Licensing Process," 2123 Rayburn

11:00 a.m. — House Transportation Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee hearing on "Maritime Transportation in the Arctic: The U.S. Role," 2167 Rayburn

12:00 p.m. — Hill briefing on "The Export Subsidy RIN: A Valueless Dead End," 608 Dirksen

12:30 p.m. — Women of Renewable Industries and Sustainable Energy lunch and learn, 1501 M St NW

1:00 p.m. — House Science Energy Subcommittee hearing on the electric grid, 2318 Rayburn

2:00 p.m. — House Natural Resources Oversight Subcommittee hearing on "Wildfire Risk, Forest Health, and Associated Management Priorities of the U.S. Forest Service," 1324 Longworth

THAT'S ALL FOR ME!

To view online:
https://subscriber.politicopro.com/newsletters/morning-energy/2018/06/another-mess-for-pruitt-244517

Stories from POLITICO Pro

Another mess for Pruitt: Overstaying his White House welcome at lunch Back

By Emily Holden, Andrew Restuccia and Anthony Adragna | 06/06/2018 10:17 PM EDT

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt loves eating at the White House mess, an exclusive U.S. Navy-run restaurant open only to White House officials, Cabinet members and other dignitaries.

But apparently he liked it too much, and the White House asked him to please eat elsewhere sometimes.

In response to Pruitt's recurring use of the restaurant next to the Situation Room in the basement of the West Wing, a member of the White House's Cabinet affairs team told agency chiefs of staff in a meeting last year that Cabinet members shouldn't treat the mess as their personal dining hall, according to three people with knowledge of the issue.

The message was clear, according to one person close to Pruitt: "We love having Mr. Pruitt, but it's not meant for everyday use." Another person added that the White House asked Cabinet members to visit the mess only occasionally because there are few tables available.

A renovation to update the West Wing HVAC last August included the mess kitchen and may have limited space, one person said. The renovation came shortly after the president tapped John Kelly as chief of staff, and he implemented several day-to-day changes to bring order to the White House.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment and EPA declined to comment. Pruitt's allies privately disputed that the warning about overuse of the mess was aimed squarely at him, but nobody contests that he's a frequent presence at the White House for lunch.

Pruitt has been known to complain that EPA headquarters has no cafeteria of its own and no private dining quarters, according to multiple sources, who said Pruitt still often heads to the White House for lunch. One source said EPA officials called the White House to explain that Pruitt didn't have a place to eat at EPA and would like to continue to visit. Pruitt's EPA office is only a few blocks up Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House.

A billing statement from July 2017 offered a glimpse into Pruitt's use of the mess, showing the EPA chief or people linked to him dined at the mess at least nine times that month, racking up a bill of $400, a relative bargain in downtown Washington. Pruitt and his guests dined on dishes like "cowboy" skirt steak, popcorn chicken and waffles, spinach strawberry salad and beer-braised brisket tacos.

While the food is considered to be top-notch, the prices are a real bargain. Skirt steak runs just $10.25, while coriander beef kabobs were just $11.95 each. And a cheeseburger runs just $6.35, according to his bill. The burger at another of Pruitt's haunts, French bistro Le Diplomate, runs $17.

Records obtained through a Sierra Club Freedom of Information Act request also show Pruitt often sought to bring friends from Oklahoma to the White House mess.

Five friends from Tulsa — Charlie Polston, Carlyn Mattox, David Mattox, Bob Wagoner and Jerry Dillon — were invited for a September lunch there with him, though it didn't appear in Pruitt's detailed calendar obtained through FOIA.

That lunch came just two weeks after Pruitt made a lunch date there with Bob Funk, a wealthy Oklahoma Republican with whom he bought a major stake in the minor league Oklahoma City RedHawks baseball team back in 2003.

"Please have Mr. Funk arrive at EPA building at 11:40am to ride with Administrator Pruitt to the WH," Lincoln Ferguson, a senior adviser for public affairs, wrote in an email. There was no entry in Pruitt's calendar for the time when the lunch was to have taken place.

Calendars from Pruitt's senior aides show he made frequent use of the space in the month following his February 2017 Senate confirmation. He dined there on Feb. 27, March 2 and met with Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and West Wing adviser, on March 13. Chief of staff Ryan Jackson's calendar also lists a lunch in the "Mess" on March 16.

Pruitt also hosted representatives from the Oklahoma Farm Bureau on March 29, according to Jackson's calendar. And he returned for lunch with Mike Catanzaro, a senior White House energy aide, and several senior aides on April 7.

Pruitt and his guests also seemed to have a sweet tooth, partaking of a dessert called "Chocolate Freedom" on multiple occasions. As POLITICO reported in January 2017, the dish — a molten cake made with imported French chocolate that must be ordered at the beginning of lunch because of the baking time — was also popular among Obama administration staffers on their way out the door.

Chocolate Freedom has garnered rave reviews online, and once prompted comedian Zach Galifianakis to ask whether it was also the staff's nickname for former President Barack Obama.

Also available to diners: boxes of red, white and blue M&Ms featuring the presidential seal.

Alex Guillén contributed to this report.

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Pruitt wanted to buy 'old mattress' from Trump International Hotel Back

By Anthony Adragna | 06/04/2018 10:43 AM EDT

Two senior House Oversight Democrats are demanding Chairman Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) subpoena Scott Pruitt for documents after one of his closest aides told congressional investigators the EPA administrator had her book a personal flight to the Rose Bowl, search for housing for him and try to buy him an "old mattress" from the Trump International Hotel.

Ranking member Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) and Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) demanded that Gowdy compel Pruitt to turn over all documents related to the potential mattress purchase, efforts to secure personal flights, and work that agency employees performed on non-EPA tasks for Pruitt that have been withheld from an earlier April Democratic request. That followed a May 18 transcribed interview with Millan Hupp, Pruitt's scheduler.

"If Ms. Hupp's statements to the Committee are accurate, Administrator Pruitt crossed a very clear line and must be held accountable," they wrote. "Federal ethics laws prohibit Administrator Pruitt from using his official position for personal gain and from requesting and accepting services from a subordinate employee that are not part of that employee's official duties."

As part of its investigation into Pruitt, the Oversight Committee said it has conducted several transcribed interviews and obtained 2,350 pages of documents, and a spokeswoman criticized the release of Hupp's testimony.

"Selectively releasing portions of witness interview transcripts damages the credibility of our investigation and discourages future witnesses from coming forward. The Committee will continue conducting a serious, fact-driven investigation, and therefore will wait until the conclusion of our investigation to release our findings," committee spokeswoman Amanda Gonzalez said in a statement.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Monday the administration is "looking into" the issues in the Democrats' letter, but didn't outline any more specific steps.

"I couldn't comment on the specifics of the furniture use in his apartment and certainly would not attempt to," she said, referring to Pruitt's interest in the mattress.

According to the Democrats' letter, Hupp told Oversight staff she worked with the managing director of the Trump International Hotel in hopes of securing an old mattress. She said Pruitt had told her someone at the hotel indicated he could purchase the mattress, though she did not know why he wished to do so and did not know if he ultimately bought it.

In addition, Hupp said she sent several emails to real estate agents over a period of several months last summer during work hours to help Pruitt find housing after he verbally asked for her help. She said she visited a "probably more than 10" properties during her lunch hour over the course of several months. Hupp said she didn't use work email for the searches and was not paid for her efforts.

Pruitt and his wife ultimately settled on an apartment on 13th and U streets, but left it shortly afterwards because "they were not comfortable in the area," according to Hupp.

Democratic lawmakers have honed in on Pruitt's admission during a May 16 Senate subcommittee hearing that Hupp had searched for housing for him without pay on her own personal time.

"It doesn't cut it that they're a friend or that kind of thing," Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) told Pruitt at the hearing, because having a subordinate staff member voluntarily conduct tasks on personal time would constitute a gift.

"That's in violation of federal law," Udall told Pruitt.

An EPA spokesman said the agency continued to give the information it was seeking.

"We are working diligently with Chairman Gowdy and are in full cooperation in providing the Committee with the necessary documents, travel vouchers, receipts and witnesses to his inquiries." EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox said in a statement.

According to the Democrats' letter, Hupp said around Christmas she used a personal credit card from Pruitt in her possession to arrange his personal trip to the Rose Bowl in California to watch the Oklahoma Sooners football team play. She did not know why Pruitt, who sent her the details for the trip, and couldn't book the flight on his own.

"He just sent me the flights details and asked me to book for him," Hupp said.

Hupp indicated she considered Pruitt a personal friend, which was why she did these tasks for him. She said the two had met for dinners that were attended by just the two of them.

"We worked very closely together and spent a lot of time together," she said. "I traveled with him, so naturally a friendship developed."

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Republicans losing patience with scandal-scarred Pruitt Back

By Anthony Adragna and Emily Holden | 06/06/2018 05:37 PM EDT

Republicans on Capitol Hill are growing frustrated with EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt — and many are now publicly questioning whether he can hang on to his job amid the unending stream of scandals.

Several GOP lawmakers said their patience was running thin after this week's news that Pruitt sought to buy to buy a used mattress from the Trump Hotel and inquired about securing a Chick-fil-A franchise for his wife. And Pruitt's circle of confidantes inside the agency appeared to be shrinking as well, with two of his closest aides set to depart in the coming days.

"The constant drip needs to stop so the agency can get its footing and focus back," House Energy and Commerce Chairman Greg Walden (R-Ore.) told reporters. "They're doing some really good work in the environmental front, but this needs to stop."

"Sometimes people get tripped up on other things besides the core mission, and I think that's what you're seeing," Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.) told reporters.

Pruitt's scheduler, Millan Hupp, is resigning following her interview by the House Oversight Committee during which she disclosed that she helped her boss find housing and inquired about purchasing a used mattress for him from the Trump International Hotel.

And his top legal counsel, Sarah Greenwalt, will also depart, according to sources. Both women had worked for Pruitt in the Oklahoma attorney general's office and both were among the staff that received raises that had been rejected by the White House.

"I think it's extremely fair to say her and Millan both are tired of the daily grind here," one EPA official said. "Everybody is painfully aware of that."

While acknowledging that President Donald Trump would ultimately make any decision about Pruitt's job, several Republicans indicated Pruitt's support was waning in their conference.

"I'm not going to come down here, just because he happens to be a nominee of a president I support or a nominee from my party, and try to defend the indefensible," Sen. John Kennedy (R-La.) said. "I thought that Mr. Pruitt would have learned his lesson."

Kennedy added: "I said the same thing about Tom Price," referring to Trump's former HHS secretary who resigned after spending lavishly on military and private jets.

Trump reaffirmed his support for Pruitt on Wednesday when they participated in a briefing on the 2018 hurricane season with several Cabinet officials.

"EPA is doing really, really well," Trump said. "You know, somebody has to say that about you a little bit. You know that, Scott."

But even staunch Pruitt allies like Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) said the mounting scandals had them rethinking their support.

"Some are true, some are not true. Whether he can weather the storm, I'm not sure," Inhofe said. "The accusations are all troubling. They are."

A few Republicans stood by Pruitt, arguing he's been targeted by an environmental community and press corps eager to take him down.

"I like him," Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) said. "He is a target because he's keeping the president's campaign promises."

But a more common view among GOP lawmakers was the collective stream of scandals were taking their toll and making Pruitt's position untenable.

"Take a thousand cuts and [there's] not much energy left," Senate Appropriations Chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) told reporters.

Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.), who leads the Energy and Commerce subcommittee overseeing EPA, joked he "can't keep up" with the flood of allegations and said he's concerned they haven't stopped.

"These unforced errors are unforced errors," he said. "I don't like being asked all the time about this."

But he raised a possible reason why Republicans weren't abandoning Pruitt: getting a replacement confirmed by the Senate would be nearly impossible.

"Are you going to promise me we could even get an administrator?" he said. "I think that's another concern."

In a video posted by a Nexstar Wednesday, Pruitt defended his attempts to set his wife up with a Chick-fil-A franchise Wednesday, while the president reaffirmed his support in the administrator.

Pruitt said that his wife is "an entrepreneur herself" and that the pair loved the fast-food franchise. As he has in the past, Pruitt dismissed criticism of his behavior as being driven by opposition to the Trump administration's deregulatory policies.

"With great change comes, I think, opposition," he said in a clip the reporter posted to Twitter.

Pruitt did not directly address whether he had asked an EPA aide to reach out to Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy to inquire about his wife opening up her own restaurant, as the Washington Post first reported Tuesday.

"Chick-fil-A is a franchise of faith and it's one of the best in the country, so that was something we were very excited about," he told the Nextstar reporter Wednesday. "We need more of them in Tulsa, [Okla.]. We need more of them across the country."

Kelsey Tamborrino contributed to this report.

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Trump's Interior chief 'hopping around from campaign event to campaign event' Back

By Ben Lefebvre and Esther Whieldon | 10/05/2017 05:01 AM EDT

Republican donors paid up to $5,000 per couple for a photo with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke at a fundraiser held during a taxpayer-funded trip to the U.S. Virgin Islands, according to documents reviewed by POLITICO — raising questions about his habit of mixing official government business with political activism.

The new details about Zinke's March trip to the Caribbean, including the previously undisclosed invitation to the Virgin Islands Republican Party fundraiser, emerged after weeks of scrutiny of the former Montana GOP congressman's travels. The nearly two-hour event was one of more than a half-dozen times Zinke has met with big donors or political groups while on department-paid trips, Interior travel records and other documents show.

Ethics watchdogs say Zinke is combining politics with his Interior duties so frequently that he risks tripping over the prohibitions against using government resources for partisan activity, even though his appearance at the Virgin Islands event seems to have been legal. Democrats have also seized on the issue, including 26 House members who wrote in a letter Tuesday that Zinke's travels "give the appearance that you are mixing political gatherings and personal destinations with official business."

Zinke has said all his actions have obeyed the law, dismissing concerns about his travel as "a little BS."

But some ethics advocates say Zinke's attendance at a fundraiser during his first month as secretary is not in line with past administrations' conduct, even if he crossed no legal red lines.

"It happens on occasion with other Cabinet secretaries, perhaps even a little more often as you get near the election, but it is not a very common practice for Cabinet members to be hopping around from campaign event to campaign event like we're seeing with Zinke," said Craig Holman, government affairs specialist for government watchdog Public Citizen.

The secretary is already under investigation by his department's inspector general over his use of taxpayer-funded private planes for some of the trips, and the Office of Special Counsel is looking into an activist group's allegations that he violated the Hatch Act, the law limiting political activism by federal employees. The White House has cracked down on Cabinet members' travel habits following former HHS Secretary Tom Price's resignation on Friday, which occurred after POLITICO reported on his own expensive flights.

Zinke visited the Virgin Islands from March 30 to April 1 on an official trip related to the Interior Department's role overseeing the U.S. territory. On his first day, following a "veterans meet and greet" and a reception with Gov. Kenneth Mapp, he appeared in his personal capacity at a March fundraiser for the local Republican Party at the patio bar of the Club Comanche Hotel St. Croix, department records show.

Tickets for the fundraiser ranged from $75 per person to as much as $5,000 per couple to be an event "Patron," according to Zinke's official calendar and a copy of the invitation. Patrons and members of the host committee, who paid $1,500 per couple, could get a photo with Zinke at the start of the event, which was attended by local party members and elected officials.

The following day, Zinke took a $3,150 flight on a private plane, paid for by the department, from St. Croix to official functions on St. Thomas and returned later that evening. Interior Department officials said there was no

other way to accommodate his schedule, which included official events on both islands commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Dutch government transferring control of the islands to the United States.

Zinke is allowed to engage in partisan political activity in a "purely personal (not official) capacity," so long as he does not use government resources, according to Interior Department guidelines on the Hatch Act and other federal laws. The invitation to the GOP fundraiser did not identify Zinke by his official title and included a disclaimer that the money is being solicited by the local party and "not by any federal official."

All told, Zinke has spent around $20,000 for three charter flights as secretary, nowhere near the $1 million tab Price racked up on non-commercial trips. But he has on numerous occasions attended political receptions, spoken to influential conservative groups or appeared alongside past campaign donors during trips has taken outside of Washington, D.C., for official department business.

In one instance, Zinke gave a motivational speech for a professional hockey team owned by a major campaign contributor that he said was official business — and which required him to charter a $12,000 flight to Montana for an appearance at the Western Governors Association the next day.

In another case, during a speech to the Western Conservative Summit in Denver, he was introduced via a recorded voice as the Interior secretary and Zinke proceeded to talk about the agency's priorities. The summit was organized by the Centennial Institute, which bills itself as Colorado Christian University's think tank and is a part of the State Policy Network of organizations that collectively push for conservative state-level legislation.

An Interior spokeswoman said Zinke always follows the law but declined to answer specific questions about his appearance at the Virgin Islands fundraiser, nor say whether he would keep raising political money. The agency also has yet to post Zinke's trip expenses involving any of the political events.

"The Interior Department under the Trump Administration has always and will always work to ensure all officials follow appropriate rules and regulations when traveling, including seeking commercial options at all times appropriate and feasible, to ensure the efficient use of government resources," spokeswoman Heather Swift said in a statement.

Swift did not respond to questions about whether the department had gotten reimbursement for the political portion of Zinke's three-day Virgin Islands trip, as the head of one watchdog group says it should have.

"Some of this travel is clearly political and that part of the travel should have been paid for by the RNC, NRCC, state political parties, a campaign committee or Zinke personally," said Daniel Stevens, executive director of the Campaign for Accountability.

No payments to the department are listed in the Virgin Islands Republican Party's FEC records.

Zinke is not the first Interior secretary, or Cabinet member, to have his activities questioned.

In 2012, a watchdog group called Cause of Action urged the Office of Special Counsel to investigate whether President Barack Obama's then- Interior Secretary Ken Salazar had violated the Hatch Act while taking an Obama reelection campaign RV tour of Colorado with a couple of lawmakers and the state lieutenant governor. Local organizers of one stop on that tour had billed Salazar on its online events calendar as attending the political rally in his official role. OSC would not say whether its investigation uncovered any problems, but travel records Interior has posted show that one of Salazar's aides had told the tour's coordinator the schedule "should not refer to (Salazar as) 'secretary.'" Salazar did not respond to a request for comment.

A former Salazar aide, who was not authorized to speak on the record, said the Obama administration generally tried to avoid scheduling political events that coincided with official travel because it was difficult to divvy up what expenses should be reimbursed by a campaign.

The special counsel's office found Obama HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius in violation of the Hatch Act in 2012, saying she had made "extemporaneous partisan remarks" by endorsing a candidate for North Carolina governor during a speech she made in her official capacity. Sebelius tried to scrub the violation by reclassifying the appearance as political and reimbursing the Treasury Department for costs associated with the trip.

Sally Jewell, who was Interior secretary during Obama's second term, said Zinke was within his rights to appear at the fundraiser in the Virgin Islands. Jewell said she once appeared at a fundraiser for Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell while in Obama's Cabinet, though she paid her own way to Washington state and was not identified by her official title.

"If he had legitimate business while he's on the island, to do a political thing on the side, I don't think that is that unusual," Jewell said in an interview.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt canceled his scheduled appearance at a fundraiser for the Oklahoma Republican Party in April because an invitation had identified him by his official title and said he would discuss his work at the agency. EPA ethics officials said he would have been cleared to attend the event if not for that language on the invitation.

Watchdog groups say Zinke's behavior fits a pattern for Trump's Cabinet.

"These government resources have been abused by this administration," said Virginia Canter, an executive branch ethics counsel for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington who previously worked as an ethics official for Presidents George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush and Obama. "To the extent that some of that supports their political ambitions is inconsistent with the intent of this authority."

The Campaign for Accountability called on Interior's inspector general and the Office of Special Counsel to investigate whether Zinke violated the Hatch Act or department ethics rules with his speech to the hockey team, which the group said appeared to be a favor for a donor. Interior's IG office announced its investigation earlier this week, and OSC told the Campaign for Accountability that it was looking into the group's complaint, according to an email shared with POLITICO. The OSC declined to comment.

Reps. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Donald McEachin (D-Va.) have asked Interior's IG to also look into any trips on which the secretary was accompanied by his wife, Lola Zinke, who is chairing the campaign of Montana Republican Troy Downing, a candidate to unseat Democratic Sen. Jon Tester next year. Swift said Lola Zinke was not in the Virgin Islands and has paid her own way whenever she has traveled with her husband on official trips.

Many who know him see Zinke's travels as an attempt to keep in touch with political contacts as he contemplates what he will do after leaving the Trump administration. Back home, the 55-year-old former Montana congressman is seen as an attractive candidate for the open-seat governor's race in 2020, when Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock will have to step down because of term limits.

"I think he's definitely got political aspirations; that's one of the reasons why he is where he is at right now," said Land Tawney, executive director of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a Montana-based sportsman group that supported Zinke's bid for Interior secretary. "You don't go from being a Montana legislator to a first-term congressman to [Interior] secretary without having ambition."

The Virgin Islands trip was Zinke's first interaction with big donors or influential conservative groups during his travel as Interior secretary.

A weeklong trip in May that took Zinke through Montana, Utah and California also offered a chance to squeeze in some political events.

Zinke delivered the keynote speech at the RNC spring meeting on May 11 in Coronado, Calif. Zinke had flown to California the previous night, after several days touring monuments in Utah, and the RNC speech was his only event in the state aside from a meeting earlier that afternoon with Rep. Amata Radewagen, the Republican delegate from American Samoa, and members of the American Tunaboat Association.

The next day, Zinke flew back to Montana, where he joined Sen. Steve Daines (R-Mont.) and Vice President Mike Pence to tour a coal mine on the Crow Indian reservation operated by the Westmoreland Coal Co.

The trip offered Zinke and Pence an opportunity to tout the Trump administration's work to promote new coal mining on federal lands — and it allowed them to make a brief detour to promote Zinke's congressional replacement. That Friday night, Zinke, Pence and Daines attended a political rally for GOP candidate Greg Gianforte, and Zinke attended a get-out-the vote event for the Montana GOP the next day.

Zinke apparently paid for his return trip to Washington out of his own pocket — it was marked "personal travel" on his calendar, a designation not applied to the other flights on that trip.

Gianforte, whose wife is a major political donor in Montana, won the May 25 special election to take over Zinke's House seat.

Greg and Susan Gianforte donated more than $10,000 to Zinke's 2016 congressional campaign and another $10,000 to a joint Zinke-Daines PAC, according to federal records. The couple donated $5,000 for his earlier run for Congress.

Zinke met with big influencers and donors in June as well.

On June 25, he flew from D.C. to Reno, Nev., where his only scheduled event was a meeting of the Rule of Law Defense Fund, a group of Republican attorneys general that has been linked to the Koch brothers, where he spoke and took questions for about 30 minutes, according to his schedule.

After his remarks, he sat at a dinner table with Montana's attorney general, the government relations specialist for the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino and Las Vegas Sands, and Koch Industries lobbyist Allen Richardson, Interior documents show.

The next day, Zinke flew to Las Vegas for an event on public lands in nearby Pahrump, Nev., and a speech that night to the National Hockey League's Vegas Golden Knights. Bill Foley, the team owner and chairman of Fidelity, introduced Zinke. Foley donated $7,800 to Zinke's 2014 campaign, while employees and PACs associated with Fidelity and related companies gave another $180,000. Interior officials said the speech to the NHL team was part of Zinke's official duties, and they pointed to scheduling conflicts it created to justify his use of a $12,000 private plane to get to a Western Governors Association meeting in Montana the next day.

In July, Zinke spoke to several conservative groups in Colorado during a three-day trip that also included tours of Interior Department facilities in the state. He flew into Denver on July 20 so he could appear that evening at a closed-door reception for the American Legislative Exchange Council, a group of conservative state legislators, lobbyists and industry groups that has pushed for more state control over federal lands.

And over the next two days, he was a featured speaker at a Republican committee roundtable and attended the Western Conservative Summit in Denver.

Eric Wolff contributed to this report.

To view online click here.

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Zinke's political ties to Virgin Islands improved Interior's hurricane response, party boss says Back

By Ben Lefebvre | 06/07/2018 05:11 AM EDT

The top GOP official in the U.S. Virgin Islands suggested his fundraising group's "behind the scenes" relationship with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke helped influence the department's response to last year's hurricanes in the island territory.

John Canegata, the head of the Virgin Islands Republican Party, said he had direct access to Interior officials after the storm thanks to money his group raised for Zinke, whom he described as a "close friend." Zinke, a former congressman, has known Canegata since at least 2015, and the secretary was at a fundraiser for the VIGOP, as the group is known, during an official trip to the islands in his first month in President Donald Trump's Cabinet.

Interior officials acknowledged reaching out to Canegata, who also works for a major rum distiller in the territory, although they said it was part of a wider effort to contact business leaders based in the territory and Zinke did not call him personally. However, a representative of the distiller said Canegata was not involved in their relief efforts, and a spokesman for the Virgin Islands' House delegate disputed Canegata's involvement in the hurricane response.

The department expedited reimbursements of rum taxes as part of its response to the hurricanes, although it's unclear whether Canegata's connection influenced that decision. Interior has jurisdiction over U.S. territories including the Virgin Islands but not Puerto Rico, which suffered more extensive devastation.

Disaster response experts say it would be inappropriate for Canegata's political connections to influence Interior's efforts in the Virgin Islands.

"These are processes that are supposed to be transparent and supposed to be above the board," said Eric LeCompte, executive director of Jubilee USA, an anti-poverty group that has been involved in hurricane disaster relief efforts. "So, it would not be something a political party would be part of."

VIGOP is not a typical political party and faces frequent inquiries from the FEC to better explain its fundraising practices and expenses. Some critics, including past Republican clients, say the group bilks conservative donors with promises to fight Democrats while spending the bulk of its money on overhead instead of political advocacy. The group spends the vast majority of its money on a small group of Washington-area political consultants who have also done work for Zinke's campaign and leadership PACs.

Zinke was introduced to the VIGOP in 2015 by a Washington fundraising consultant who also did work for his campaigns, and as a member of Congress he has traveled to at least two political conferences in the Virgin

Islands sponsored by the group, POLITICO reported last year. Zinke and Canegata are seen together during a prior trip in a photo posted to Facebook.

Canegata boasted about his Zinke ties in a televised appearance on WTJX Virgin Islands Public Broadcasting that aired last month but has not received widespread attention outside of the territory.

"We were in direct connection with the Department of Interior," Canegata said in the broadcast.

"Secretary Zinke, happens to be, I wouldn't say a personal friend, but a close friend," Canegata continued. "Prior to him being the secretary of Interior, we spent some time in Washington, we spent some time here in the Virgin Islands. We supported him when he was a congressman and, behold, he becomes the secretary of Interior."

While Canegata credited other officials with their part in aiding the island's response, he said the pre-existing connection to Zinke was key.

"Obviously, we have our congresswoman, our governor doing their job," Canegata continued. "But behind the scenes, trust me, a lot of telephone calls, a lot of maneuvering was going on because, I think, some of the relationships we built."

The Office of Special Counsel on Tuesday closed its investigation into Zinke's appearance at the Virgin Islands fundraiser in March 2017, finding that he had not violated the Hatch Act because he was there in his official capacity and VIGOP reimbursed Interior for its expenses. Interior's inspector general also recently said the appearance at the fundraiser was not inappropriate. It is unclear whether either of those investigations addressed any link between VIGOP and Interior's hurricane response; both offices declined to comment.

Interior's Office of Insular Affairs, which oversees the Virgin Islands, "reached out to dozens of local government employees as well as major private sector employers in the USVI to check their power status and to see how the office could help," Interior spokeswoman Heather Swift said in an email. Canegata "was contacted by those Insular Affairs officials because he works for one of those major private employers, Cruzan Rum."

Canegata, a supply chain specialist at the rum distillery, had no role in the company's disaster relief efforts, according to Cruzan Rum human resources manager Ayanda Daniels.

"He wasn't part of the coordination," Daniels told POLITICO. "Maybe he had a conversation with someone in order to do something, but we had another team for company response."

James Norton, a former Department of Homeland Security Deputy official during the George W. Bush administration, said it is important for disaster response efforts to be handled through the appropriate channels.

"As a matter of proper procedure, it would only be appropriate for all federal actions to be dealt with solely with official authorities at the Department of Defense, Interior, Homeland Security, FEMA, etc., and those local officials on the ground," said Norton, who is now head of the consulting agency Play-Action Strategies. "Anything other than raising awareness and reaching out to get an update on what's happening would be inappropriate, as a political party or other organization doesn't have command and control authority, nor would they be the designated principal federal official on the ground directing rescue operations."

A spokesman for Stacey Plaskett, the Democratic House delegate from the Virgin Islands, disputed Canegata's version of events.

"I cannot honestly remember hearing them or seeing them do anything to that effect," Plaskett's spokesman Mike McQuerry said. "The congresswoman was the person here in D.C. that worked extremely hard during that time to get those funds to the Virgin Islands."

Canegata did not respond to a request for comment this week.

Interior expedited reimbursement of $223 million in taxes on Virgin Islands rum imported into the mainland and provided a $567,500 grant to help with a post-hurricane finance audit. Other hurricane relief funds would have come from FEMA, an Insular Affairs spokesperson said.

Otherwise, Zinke and Insular Affairs head Doug Domenech met with Virgin Islands Gov. Kenneth Mapp to discuss recovery efforts, the Insular Affairs spokesperson said. In November, Domenech also met representatives of Cruzan Rum's parent company, Beam Suntory, to discuss the rum tax reimbursements Interior makes to the territory. Beam Suntory donated $1.5 million to hurricane relief efforts the previous month.

Swift said Zinke did not personally reach out to Canegata. "The only official in the USVI the Secretary called was Governor Mapp," she said.

To view online click here.

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Murray had early access to Perry to share coal plan Back

By Eric Wolff | 12/07/2017 04:22 PM EDT

Coal magnate Bob Murray pitched Energy Secretary Rick Perry on his plan to throw an economic lifeline to coal companies less than a month before Perry set in motion plans to aid the industry, according to newly disclosed photographs that show the two meeting.

The liberal magazine In These Times obtained pictures of Murray and Perry from a March 29 meeting at Energy Department headquarters, less than a month after Perry was sworn in. Several other officials were in attendance, including Andrew Wheeler, who at the time was a lobbyist for Murray and has since been nominated as EPA's No. 2 official.

The meeting puts Murray and Perry together at a crucial moment in the timeline of the Trump administration's push to save the struggling coal industry, an effort that would benefit Murray Energy in particular while hiking electricity prices for potentially millions of people. A month before the meeting, one of Murray's biggest customers, FirstEnergy Corp., had told investors it was seriously considering sending its merchant division, FirstEnergy Solutions, into bankruptcy, a move which would likely void its supply contracts with Murray's coal mines.

Three weeks after Murray's visit, Perry would order a grid study that later became part of the justification for a proposed rule to reward coal and nuclear power plants for providing "grid resiliency." FERC, which has jurisdiction over the proposal, must make a decision on it by Monday.

At the time of the meeting, Wheeler was already the leading candidate to become the deputy administrator for EPA. Wheeler, who represented Murray as a lobbyist for Faegre Baker Daniels, would not be officially

nominated for months. Wheeler, who has acknowledged participating in meetings on Murray's coal plan at DOE and on Capitol Hill, cleared committee last week and is awaiting Senate confirmation.

Murray is an outspoken supporter of President Donald Trump and held a fundraiser for him during the 2016 campaign.

DOE did not dispute the validity of the photos.

"Industry stakeholders visit the Department of Energy on a daily basis," DOE spokeswoman Shaylyn Hynes said, when asked about the meeting. "The DOE proposal to FERC was about the future and resiliency of the nation's power supply, an issue much bigger than one industry or company."

The photographs show Perry sitting at the head of a table in the Department of Energy, with Bob Murray, CEO of Murray Energy, to his left, and Wheeler down the table from Murray.

"Enclosed is an Action Plan for achieving reliable and low cost electricity ... and to assist in the survival of our Country's coal industry, which ... power grid reliability and low cost electricity," Murray writes in a cover letter to Perry, parts of which are visible in one photo from the meeting.

Though the document has never been publicly released, DOE critics say Murray's plan appears to have inspired DOE's grid study and the proposed rule Perry sent FERC in September. Copies are visible at the seats of most of the participants, including Perry and Murray. Wheeler, who told members of the Senate Environment Committee he had only seen the memo briefly, is not holding a copy in the photos obtained by In These Times. Murray told Greenwire in November he "didn't have any involvement" in writing the rule.

Murray has acknowledged sharing the plan with Trump.

"I gave Mr. Trump what I called an action plan very early," Murray said in a recent PBS Frontline documentary on EPA. "It's about three-and-a-half pages and — of what he needed to do in his administration. He's wiped out page one."

The meeting appears to have been successful for all. One of the photos shows Perry and Murray in a big bear hug.

To view online click here.

Back

Murray delivered executive orders on coal rules to Trump administration Back

By Darius Dixon | 06/06/2018 07:05 PM EDT

Coal magnate Bob Murray delivered six draft executive orders ready for President Donald Trump to sign to roll back Obama-era environmental regulations in the early weeks of the administration, according to newly released Energy Department documents.

The documents released Wednesday after a Freedom of Information Act request include a letter to Energy Secretary Rick Perry from Murray praising Trump's March 2017 energy independence executive order, which largely aimed to help the coal industry. And to bolster that effort, Murray wrote, "we have developed the

enclosed materials for your review and consideration, consisting of: six (6) Executive Orders further rescinding anti-coal regulations of the Obama administration; and one (1) memorandum outlining the legal rationale for each of these action, and others."

Those executive orders were also sent to EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, whose agency had jurisdiction over most of the issues they involved, such as ozone rules and regulations on coal ash.

Trump has not signed executive orders resembling Murray's, but the administration has moved to enact the policies, such as pulling U.S. out of the Paris climate agreement. The documents, which were sent to DOE the day Trump signed his energy independence order and one day before Murray met with Perry and DOE chief of staff Brian McCormack, also included concepts about grid security and "resiliency" that Perry later touted as part of his push to stop coal power plants from closing.

"The Department of Energy ("DOE") must issue an emergency directive to have an immediate study done of the security and resiliency of our electric power grids," the document states. "DOE will direct that no power plants having an available fuel supply of at least forty-five (45) days be closed during the study period, or a minimum of two (2) years."

Perry later ordered his staff to write a study about the electric grid that was eventually tied to a regulatory proposal that FERC create financial rewards for power plants with a 90-day supply of fuel on-site. That condition would have overwhelming benefited coal and nuclear generators, but it was shot down by FERC in January.

Critics have said Murray would be the biggest beneficiary of Trump's efforts, since his company supplies coal to many of the power plants at risk of closing because of stiff competition from cheap natural gas and renewable power as well as lagging electricity demand from consumers.

Murray spokesman Gary Broadbent confirmed the company had submitted the documents to Perry "to assist in the reversal of the illegal, job-killing, anti-coal regulations of the Obama Administration."

"Mr. Murray has always sought to secure reliable, low-cost electricity for all Americans, as well as to preserve and protect the jobs and family livelihoods of thousands of coal mining families," he said in a statement. "We applaud the actions taken by President Trump's Administration, to date, to protect these jobs and to advance the energy security of the United States."

Murray has repeatedly called on DOE to issue must-run orders for FirstEnergy power plants that consume his coal, and he blasted the FERC commissioners who opposed the on-site fuel proposal.

On Tuesday, a top DOE official said the agency is still formulating a plan to keep struggling coal and nuclear power plants from closing, and it had no deadline to meet Trump's demand to rescue them.

"We are evaluating options," Energy Undersecretary Mark Menezes told reporters. Last week, Trump called on DOE to take "immediate steps" to stop a wave of coal and nuclear power plant retirements, and like Perry, he cast the shutdowns as a threat to national security.

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House passes WRDA bill Back

By Annie Snider | 06/06/2018 09:42 PM EDT

The House has overwhelmingly approved the Water Resources Development Act of 2018, H.R. 8 (115), the first major infrastructure legislation to move under the Trump administration.

Lawmakers signed off on the measure on a broadly bipartisan vote of 408-2. The bill would authorize six new Army Corps of Engineers projects and enact a suite of policy reforms at the red tape-laden agency. It is significantly narrower than the Senate's measure, which would also make changes to EPA drinking water and wastewater programs.

And it includes a provision that could stir some controversy with the Senate, ordering a study of whether the Army Corps' civilian work should remain within the Department of Defense.

But House leaders dodged provisions that could have derailed the bill by blocking controversial amendments from floor consideration. Those included efforts to repeal the Obama administration's Waters of the U.S. rule, allow firearms at Army Corps recreational sites and exempt pesticide spraying from Clean Water Act permitting requirements.

WHAT'S NEXT: The Senate is expected to consider its version of the WRDA bill, America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018, S. 2800 (115), this summer.

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Trump calls for coal, nuclear power plant bailout Back

By Eric Wolff | 06/01/2018 02:29 PM EDT

President Donald Trump pressed for a quick regulatory bailout for struggling coal power plants on Friday — a move that would buoy a mining industry that offered him crucial support in 2016, but is riling other energy companies and even some free-market conservatives.

The White House called on Energy Secretary Rick Perry to take immediate steps to keep both coal and nuclear power plants running, backing Perry's claim that plant closures threaten national security. An administration strategy to do that laid out in a memo to the National Security Council circulated widely among industry groups on Friday, but it was not clear that intervention could survive the inevitable political and legal challenges.

It was the latest step in more than a year of efforts by the administration to compel power companies to keep operating the money-losing plants that are suffering from the rise of competing energy sources like natural gas. Those proposals have drawn opposition from most utilities, along with environmentalists, gas producers, power grid operators and conservatives who say it would be an unwarranted intrusion to the energy markets.

The White House statement calling for action came after days of Trump making similarly aggressive moves on international trade, slapping tariffs on the European Union, Canada and Mexico to protect U.S. industries like aluminum and steel. In this case, the president is acting on behalf of what he likes to call "beautiful, clean coal," a once-dominant fuel that still plays a major role in his stump speeches.

Trump "has directed Secretary of Energy Rick Perry to prepare immediate steps to stop the loss of these resources," White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a statement Friday, referring to coal and nuclear plants.

She added that Trump believes "keeping America's energy grid and infrastructure strong and secure protects our national security... Unfortunately, impending retirements of fuel-secure power facilities are leading to a rapid depletion of a critical part of our nation's energy mix, and impacting the resilience of our power grid."

The statement came five months after federal energy regulators rejected Perry's call that they adopt his proposal to keep the struggling coal and nuclear power plants operating. That proposal would have overwhelmingly benefited mining magnate Bob Murray, an outspoken Trump supporter whose operations supply coal to several endangered plants in the Midwest and Northeast, according to a POLITICO analysis.

Trump's National Security Council gathered Friday to discuss the draft memo that lays out arguments why the administration should use federal authority to keep the money-losing power plants open — despite the assurances from some of the nation's grid operators that no such emergency exists.

"Any federal intervention in the market to order customers to buy electricity from specific power plants would be damaging to the markets and therefore costly to consumers," said the PJM Interconnection, which operates the nation's largest power grid and stretches from the Midwest the Atlantic Coast, in a statement. "There is no need for any such drastic action."

A broad swath of trade associations representing oil and gas, wind and solar power, consumer groups and advanced energy technologies slammed the plan, and they were joined by some congressional Democrats.

"This would be an egregious abuse of power," Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) said in a statement. "I fought this proposal before, and I will continue to fight this corrupt scheme to prop up the coal industry at the expense of American consumers."

That new 41-page memo, first revealed by Bloomberg News on Thursday evening, says that under the 2015 highway and transit bill known as the FAST Act, DOE must identify critical energy infrastructure, a process the agency is undertaking now with the help of its national labs. But because that is likely to take two years, DOE in the meantime should use the 1950 Defense Production Act and the Federal Power Act to require the plants to keep operating, the memo says.

Power sector experts have said using the two laws to keep specific plants operating would stretch both those measures, and would certainly trigger a major legal fight. Critics of the administration's strategy said the memo appears to signal that the White House is preparing for a fight.

"One way to view the release of this draft is that it is a trial balloon to see how fierce and fast the opposition will be," said Dena Wiggins, CEO of the industry lobby group Natural Gas Supply Association, which opposes the DOE plan. "We've known for some time that all of these federal authorities ... were in play, so the fact that we've now seen it in writing doesn't really change anything. It does, however, underscore how hard it is to cobble together a sound legal rationale to bail out otherwise uneconomic coal and nuclear plants."

And critics say the push to bail out the plants is simply Trump's effort to reward backers like Murray, the coal baron, and live up to his campaign promise to revive coal country. Perry first began work on the power plant issue in March 2017, when he met with Murray at DOE, and Trump himself personally directed Perry to take action on the issue since last summer.

Murray's coal mines have been a major supplier for power plants owned by FirstEnergy Solutions, a unit of Ohio-based utility giant FirstEnergy that sank into bankruptcy this spring. FirstEnergy Solutions has said it plans to close or sell five of its money-losing coal and nuclear power plants.

But the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the grid operator have said that even with the planned closures, the region has ample power to supply the market's needs. Stagnant power consumption growth, coupled with the rise of natural gas and renewable power sources like wind, has displaced many of the older coal and nuclear facilities in the markets.

The memo also calls for establishing a new requirement for the electric grid based on "resilience," a term Perry injected into the regulatory conversation last fall with a proposed rule that would have rewarded plants that could keep 90 days of fuel on site. FERC rejected that rule, but it also created a new proceeding to try to define "resilience," which some in the industry say pertains to the grid's ability to withstand and recover from a physical or cyberattack.

The memo largely focuses on the issue of resilience, which it says would suffer if coal and nuclear power plants retire. It specifically targets natural gas as a weakness, because the plants that burn the fuel rely on pipelines that could be disrupted, while coal and nuclear power plants can keep months' worth of fuel on site.

"Natural gas pipelines are increasingly vulnerable to cyber and physical attacks," the memo says. "The incapacitation of certain pipelines through the United States would have severe effects on electric generation necessary to supply critical infrastructure facilities."

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House to vote Thursday on Trump's spending cuts plan Back

By Sarah Ferris | 06/06/2018 05:32 PM EDT

President Donald Trump's prized deficit-reduction package is rolling toward the House floor this week, though its prospects in the Senate remain in doubt — with little time to spare.

House leaders have set a vote Thursday on the Trump administration's roughly $15 billion rescissions bill, according to a GOP aide, nearly a full month after the proposal was first delivered to Capitol Hill.

The House Rules Committee will tee up the bill, H.R. 3 (115), on Wednesday evening, a lightning turnaround that surprised even some GOP lawmakers.

The last-minute scheduling change comes after the White House agreed this week not to slash hundreds of millions of dollars from politically sensitive programs, like Hurricane Sandy aid, which helped secure votes from numerous GOP holdouts.

Even with some of those unpopular cuts reversed, several House Republicans remain anxious about the plan's optics — specifically, cuts to the ultra-popular Children's Health Insurance Program.

At a closed-door meeting of House Republicans Wednesday, several GOP lawmakers stood up to complain that the kids' health cuts could hit hard on the campaign trail, despite assurance from neutral budget experts that the cuts wouldn't harm the program.

In fact, the vast majority of the White House's proposed spending cuts would exist only on paper. The bill would save only $1 billion over a decade, according to the CBO, which is far less than 1 percent of the size of Congress' last spending bill, H.R. 1625 (115).

Next, the White House will have to sell the bill to the Senate, where a single Republican "no" vote could sink the package.

Budget chief Mick Mulvaney has already met with Sen. Lisa Murkowski, an Alaska Republican who has raised issues with the cuts to CHIP. Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, another GOP moderate, has not yet said whether she supports the bill.

If the House clears the bill Thursday, the Senate will have roughly two weeks to send the measure to Trump's desk before its filibuster-proof powers expire June 22.

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Minibus spending package ready for House floor action Back

By Kaitlyn Burton | 06/06/2018 07:46 PM EDT

The House Rules Committee today teed up a three-bill spending bundle for floor consideration as soon as Thursday.

All in all, the panel approved 50 Energy-Water amendments, 22 Military Construction-VA amendments and seven Legislative Branch amendments, setting them up for floor votes.

While the minibus, H.R. 5895 (115), will likely pass, House Democratic leaders threw a wrench in things when they urged lawmakers to oppose the bill, POLITICO reported Tuesday evening.

Votes on the package are expected to come after a separate Thursday vote on the White House's rescissions measure, H.R. 3 (115). Conservatives, including the Republican Study Committee, asked for the spending cuts to be taken up first, according to a House GOP aide. The Rules Committee teed up the rescissions proposal in a 9-3 vote tonight, allowing no amendment votes.

The minibus would be the first House-passed fiscal 2019 funding measure.

Sarah Ferris contributed to this alert.

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House appropriators advance $35B Interior-EPA spending package Back

By Alex Guillén | 06/06/2018 05:04 PM EDT

The House Appropriations Committee today approved its $35 billion Interior-EPA spending bill by a party-line vote of 25-20.

Committee Republicans blocked an effort from Democrats to boost EPA's Office of Inspector General by $12 million, saying the watchdog already has "robust" appropriations. The bill funds the OIG at $12 million less than his request, but higher than the amount requested by the White House.

The committee voted down an amendment that would have required EPA's administrator and deputy administrator to report public details of travel costs within 10 days of a trip, along with various amendments targeting a repeal of the Waters of the U.S. rule and other policy riders, along with EPA's proposed science transparency policy, offshore drilling and other standard policy disputes.

Lawmakers approved an amendment that would change revenue sharing for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The approved amendment would send 50 percent of revenue to the federal government, 47 percent to the state and 3 percent to the Alaskan Native claims settlement fund.

They also backed a tongue-in-cheek amendment from Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Mich.) that would limit EPA from spending more than $50 on any one fountain pen, a response to a recent Washington Post report that Pruitt spent $1,560 for a dozen personalized fountain pens. The amendment passed with no "nay" votes.

WHAT'S NEXT: Lawmakers hope to have the bill before the full House sometime this summer, but it is unclear whether the Senate will act on a similar timeframe. Like most other appropriations bills in recent years, Congress has passed an omnibus rather than conferencing directly.

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GOP blocks funding increase for EPA watchdog probing Pruitt activities Back

By Alex Guillén | 06/06/2018 03:06 PM EDT

House Republicans today blocked a Democratic effort to increase funding for EPA's Office of Inspector General to help the watchdog deal with the increased workload stemming from Administrator Scott Pruitt's spending and ethics scandals.

Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.) and a bloc of Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee pushed an amendment that would have boosted OIG funding for fiscal 2019. It ultimately was voted down on a party-line vote of 21-26.

"It's hard to imagine that there is a more overworked inspector general than at the EPA these days," Pocan said. "This is not a Democrat/Republican thing, this should be a good government thing."

Interior-EPA Appropriations Chairman Ken Calvert (R-Calif.) said the bill "already includes robust support for EPA's inspector general."

The House Interior-EPA spending package would provide the OIG funding of just over $50 million, about flat with 2018's level. Most of that is appropriated directly, though some of it is pulled from the Superfund program for OIG's work on Superfund-specific issues. Pocan's amendment would have drawn the extra $12 million from EPA's "workforce reshaping" account inside the $2.5 billion environmental programs.

In a February letter, EPA Inspector General Arthur Elkins said the president's proposed OIG budget of $46 million would "substantially inhibit the OIG from performing the duties of the office." He asked instead for a budget of $62 million. That request came before an avalanche of congressional requests to review various Pruitt-related issues on spending and ethics.

WHAT'S NEXT: The committee will vote later today on the full spending bill.

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Interior advisory committee recommends streamlining environmental reviews for drilling Back

By Ben Lefebvre | 06/06/2018 06:31 PM EDT

An Interior Department advisory board on Wednesday approved a slew of recommendations aimed at expanding energy lease sales and lowering royalty rates, even as some members questioned whether it had the power to suggest changes to federal environmental reviews.

The Royalty Policy Committee wrapped up its latest meeting in New Mexico after approving nine recommendations for Secretary Ryan Zinke to change how the department collects payments from energy production on federal land. Most of the suggestions would benefit oil and gas companies operating on federal acres, while two recommendations were aimed at boosting renewable energy production.

Two committee members disagreed with a recommendation for the Bureau of Land Management to issue "categorical exclusions" for certain oil and gas projects, allowing those projects to forgo full environmental reviews under the National Environmental Protection Act.

"NEPA is not referred to in the [committee] charter," Rod Eggert, a professor at the Colorado School of Mines, said during the meeting. "The text in the charter refers to royalties and collections of royalties."

Committee member Monte Mills of the University of Montana agreed that recommending categorical exclusions fell outside of the committee's scope.

Western Energy Alliance President Kathleen Sgamma, another member of the committee, defended the recommendation, saying it would increase royalty payments to Interior by making it easier for companies to drill on public land.

"We're trying to increase competitiveness of federal lands," Sgamma said during the meeting. "NEPA is often the aspect of the federal process that takes the longest and decreases the competitiveness of public lands the most."

Ultimately, the committee approved the recommendation and deferred further discussion about the scope of its charter until its next meeting, yet to be scheduled.

The committee also suggested Interior make it easier for companies to pay lower royalty rates for mature oil and gas wells and those "difficult" to operate. And it recommended Zinke ask Congress to amend the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act with language allowing Interior to hold offshore energy project lease sales in Guam and other U.S. territories.

The committee's two renewable power suggestions were that Interior offer annual lease sales for 2 gigawatts of offshore wind power every year for a decade starting in 2024; and to instruct BLM to reduce fees and streamline permit requirements for solar projects.

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BLM tells field office to expedite drilling permit reviews Back

By Ben Lefebvre | 06/06/2018 08:20 PM EDT

The Bureau of Land Management instructed field offices to prioritize the use of old environmental reviews or categorical exclusions to expedite drilling permit applications for sites where work is already underway, according to a memo released today.

The bulletin posted on the BLM website said those methods will allow officials to process the applications "in the most expeditious and appropriate manner" under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The BLM bulletin directed its field offices that existing environmental analysis for new projects proposed for old sites "should be used to the greatest extent possible" instead of starting a new environmental review process.

If the old analysis isn't sufficient, field offices should determine whether the application falls under an existing categorical exclusion, meaning a new NEPA review would not be required. Criteria to determine whether an exclusion would be available include whether a similar project has already occurred on the same site within the previous five years.

BLM posted its memo soon after Interior's Royalty Policy Committee recommended earlier today that the agency increase its use of categorical exclusions.

WHAT'S NEXT: The environmental review priority list goes into effect immediately.

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White House, EPA headed off chemical pollution study Back

By Annie Snider | 05/14/2018 12:43 PM EDT

Scott Pruitt's EPA and the White House sought to block publication of a federal health study on a nationwide water-contamination crisis, after one Trump administration aide warned it would cause a "public relations nightmare," newly disclosed emails reveal.

The intervention early this year — not previously disclosed — came as HHS' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry was preparing to publish its assessment of a class of toxic chemicals that has contaminated water supplies near military bases, chemical plants and other sites from New York to Michigan to West Virginia.

The study would show that the chemicals endanger human health at a far lower level than EPA has previously called safe, according to the emails.

"The public, media, and Congressional reaction to these numbers is going to be huge," one unidentified White House aide said in an email forwarded on Jan. 30 by James Herz, a political appointee who oversees environmental issues at the OMB. The email added: "The impact to EPA and [the Defense Department] is going to be extremely painful. We (DoD and EPA) cannot seem to get ATSDR to realize the potential public relations nightmare this is going to be."

More than three months later, the draft study remains unpublished, and the HHS unit says it has no scheduled date to release it for public comment. Critics say the delay shows the Trump administration is placing politics ahead of an urgent public health concern — something they had feared would happen after agency leaders like Pruitt started placing industry advocates in charge of issues like chemical safety.

Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.) called the delay "deeply troubling" on Monday, urging Pruitt and President Donald Trump "to immediately release this important study."

"Families who have been exposed to emerging contaminants in their drinking water have a right to know about any health impacts, and keeping such information from the public threatens the safety, health, and vitality of communities across our country," Hassan said, citing POLITICO's reporting of the issue.Details of the internal discussions emerged from EPA emails released to the Union of Concerned Scientists under the Freedom of Information Act.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, a fellow New Hampshire Democrat, called the delay "an egregious example of politics interfering with the public's right to know. ... [I]t's unconscionable that even the existence of this study has been withheld until now."

The emails portray a "brazenly political" response to the contamination crisis, said Judith Enck, a former EPA official who dealt with the same pollutants during the Obama administration — saying it goes far beyond a normal debate among scientists.

"Scientists always debate each other, but under the law, ATSDR is the agency that's supposed to make health recommendations," she said.

The White House referred questions about the issue to HHS, which confirmed that the study has no scheduled release date.

Pruitt's chief of staff, Ryan Jackson, defended EPA's actions, telling POLITICO the agency was helping "ensure that the federal government is responding in a uniform way to our local, state, and Congressional constituents and partners."

Still, Pruitt has faced steady criticism for his handling of science at the agency, even before the recent spate of ethics investigations into his upscale travels and dealings with lobbyists. In his year leading EPA, he has overhauled several scientific advisory panels to include more industry representatives and recently ordered limits on the kinds of scientific studies the agency will consider on the health effects of pollution.

On the other hand, Pruitt has also called water pollution one of his signature priorities.

The chemicals at issue in the HHS study have long been used in products like Teflon and firefighting foam, and are contaminating water systems around the country. Known as PFOA and PFOS, they have been linked with thyroid defects, problems in pregnancy and certain cancers, even at low levels of exposure.

The problem has already proven to be enormously costly for chemicals manufacturers. The 3M Co., which used them to make Scotchguard, paid more than $1.5 billion to settle lawsuits related to water contamination and personal injury claims.

But some of the biggest liabilities reside with the Defense Department, which used foam containing the chemicals in exercises at bases across the country. In a March report to Congress, the Defense Department listed 126 facilities where tests of nearby water supplies showed the substances exceeded the current safety guidelines.

A government study concluding that the chemicals are more dangerous than previously thought could dramatically increase the cost of cleanups at sites like military bases and chemical manufacturing plants, and force neighboring communities to pour money into treating their drinking water supplies.

The discussions about how to address the HHS study involved Pruitt's chief of staff and other top aides, including a chemical industry official who now oversees EPA's chemical safety office.

Herz, the OMB staffer, forwarded the email warning about the study's "extremely painful" consequences to EPA's top financial officer on Jan. 30. Later that day, Nancy Beck, deputy assistant administrator for EPA's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, suggested elevating the study to OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs to coordinate an interagency review. Beck, who worked as a toxicologist in that office for 10 years, suggested it would be a "good neutral arbiter" of the dispute.

"OMB/OIRA played this role quite a bit under the Bush Administration, but under Obama they just let each agency do their own thing...," Beck wrote in one email that was released to UCS.

Beck, who started at OMB in 2002, worked on a similar issue involving perchlorate, an ingredient in rocket fuel — linked with thyroid problems and other ailments — that has leached from defense facilities and manufacturing sites into the drinking water of at least 20 million Americans. Beck stayed on at OMB into the Obama administration, leaving the office in January 2012 and going to work for the American Chemistry Council, where she was senior director for regulatory science policy until joining EPA last year.

Yogin Kothari, a lobbyist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, called Beck's January email "extremely troubling because it appears as though the White House is trying to interfere in a science-based risk assessment."

Environmentalists say such interference was routine during the Bush administration.

"It's why the Obama administration issued a call for scientific integrity policies across the federal government," Kothari said in an email to POLITICO. "Dr. Beck should know firsthand that the Bush administration sidelined science at every turn, given that she spent time at OMB during that time."

Soon after the Trump White House raised concerns about the impending study, EPA chief of staff Ryan Jackson reached out to his HHS counterpart, as well as senior officials in charge of the agency overseeing the assessment to discuss coordinating work among HHS, EPA and the Pentagon. Jackson confirmed the outreach last week, saying it is important for the government to speak with a single voice on such a serious issue.

"EPA is eager to participate in and, contribute to a coordinated approach so each federal stakeholder is fully informed on what the other stakeholders' concerns, roles, and expertise can contribute and to ensure that the federal government is responding in a uniform way to our local, state, and Congressional constituents and partners," Jackson told POLITICO via email.

Pruitt has made addressing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, a priority for EPA. The unpublished HHS study focused on two specific chemicals from this class, PFOA and PFOS.

States have been pleading with EPA for help, and experts say that contamination is so widespread, the chemicals are found in nearly every water supply that gets tested.

In December, the Trump administration's nominee to head the agency's chemical safety office, industry consultant Michael Dourson, withdrew his nomination after North Carolina's Republican senators said they would not support him, in large part because of their state's struggles with PFAS contamination. Dourson's previous research on the subject has been criticized as too favorable to the chemical industry.

Shortly after Dourson's nomination was dropped, Pruitt announced a "leadership summit" with states to discuss the issue scheduled for next week.

In 2016, the agency published a voluntary health advisory for PFOA and PFOS, warning that exposure to the chemicals at levels above 70 parts per trillion, total, could be dangerous. One part per trillion is roughly the equivalent of a single grain of sand in an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

The updated HHS assessment was poised to find that exposure to the chemicals at less than one-sixth of that level could be dangerous for sensitive populations like infants and breastfeeding mothers, according to the emails.

Dave Andrews, a senior scientist with the Environmental Working Group, said those conclusions line up with recent studies on the health effects of PFAS.

"They are looking at very subtle effects like increased risk of obesity for children exposed in womb, lowered immune response, and childhood vaccines becoming not as effective," Andrews said.

The HHS document at issue is called a toxicological profile, which describes the dangers of a chemical based on a review of previous scientific studies. It would carry no regulatory weight itself, but could factor into cleanup requirements at Superfund sites.

EPA scientists, including career staffers, were already talking with the HHS researchers about the differences in their two approaches to evaluating the chemicals when officials at the White House raised alarm in late January, the emails show. Those differences, according to the correspondence, stemmed from the agencies' use of different scientific studies as a basis, and from taking different approaches to accounting for the harm that the chemicals can do to the immune system — an area of research that has burgeoned in the two years since EPA issued its health advisory.

Enck, the former EPA official, said she sees one troubling gap in the emails: They make "no mention of the people who are exposed to PFOA or PFOS, there's no health concern expressed here."

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