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Subject: Washington Post: EPA dismisses dozens of key science advisers picked under Trump

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By
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Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan will purge more than 40 outside experts appointed by President Donald Trump from two key advisory panels, a move he says will help restore the role of science at the agency and reduce the heavy influence of industry over environmental regulations.

The unusual decision, announced Wednesday, will sweep away outside researchers picked under the previous administration whose expert advice helped the agency craft regulations related to air pollution, fracking and other issues.

Critics say that under Trump, membership of the two panels — the EPA's Science Advisory Board (SAB) and Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) — tilted too heavily toward regulated industries and their positions sometimes contradicted scientific consensus.

"Science is back," new EPA administrator says

The Biden administration said the move is one of several to reestablish scientific integrity across the federal government after what it characterizes as a concerted effort under the previous president to sideline or interfere with research on climate change, the novel coronavirus and other issues.

"Resetting these two scientific advisory committees will ensure the agency receives the best possible scientific insight to support our work to protect human health and the environment," Regan said in a statement.

Environmental advocates cheered the decision, saying that remaking the composition of the panels is necessary after the Trump administration illegally barred academics who received EPA grants from serving on them.

Under Trump, the EPA had argued scientists who received research funding from the agency would not be able to offer impartial advice. But environmental and public health advocates, along with some former career officials within the agency, said the policy effectively elevated experts from industry while muzzling independent scientists.

The Trump administration ended up rescinding the restriction on grant recipients after being ordered to do so last year by a federal court. But it didn't change any of its appointments after the ruling.

"It's absolutely warranted," Christopher Zarba, a retired EPA employee who directed the office that coordinates with scientific committees, said of the newly announced shake-up. "Lots and lots of the best people were excluded from being considered."

He added that none of the people picked by Trump's EPA chiefs, Scott Pruitt and Andrew Wheeler, were individually unqualified to serve. "However, the mix of people did not accurately represent mainstream science," he said.

For example, Louis Anthony "Tony" Cox, who was tapped by Pruitt in 2017 to lead the advisory panel on air pollution, is a consultant who has worked for several government agencies but also for the oil, chemical and health-care industries.

Cox dismissed the EPA's methods for tabulating the public health benefits of smog regulations as "unreliable, logically unsound, and inappropriate." His position distressed many air pollution

scientists, and two published a paper in the journal Science that warned Cox was trying to undo "the time-tested and scientifically backed" process that resulted in important public health protections.
The EPA is calling for new applications for the two panels. Nick Conger, an EPA spokesman, said advisers dropped from the committees are "eligible and encouraged to reapply" if they choose.
Normally, the agency would have asked for new applications for a handful of the positions in October.
The action Wednesday is one of several steps Regan says is necessary to rebuild the scientific integrity of the EPA and restore staff morale.
Regan recently, for instance, revived an EPA webpage on climate change deleted during Trump's first weeks in office. And In a memo to staff last week, Regan said the agency is reviewing policies that impeded science and is encouraging career employees to "bring any items of concern" to the attention of scientific integrity officials as they review Trump-era actions.
"When politics drives science rather than science informing policy," Regan wrote to staff, "we are more likely to make policy choices that sacrifice the health of the most vulnerable among us."
On the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, Trump-picked members advised the EPA to keep the standards for ozone at the current level, even as public-health experts outside the agency argued they should be tightened to help protect poor and minority communities. The agency followed the committee's advice and declined to issue stricter standards for the smog-forming pollutant, which has been linked to asthma and lung disease.
The clean air panel, meanwhile, was split on whether to recommend tougher rules for particulate matter, another pollutant emitted by power plants and cars. The agency ultimately decided last year against ratcheting up the rules, even as evidence accumulated that soot raised the risk of dying of covid-19.
In an interview earlier this month, Regan suggested the agency may revisit those decisions for acceptable pollution levels. "We want to take a close look at ozone. We want to take a look at all the NAAQS [National Ambient Air Quality Standards] that we believe are questionable."
Genna Reed, a senior analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists, a research and advocacy group, said reconstituting the panel will aid in any reassessment of air quality standards.
"It only makes sense for the agency to go back to the drawing board," she said.

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