Message

From: Carla Morgan [cmorgan@eastchicago.com]
Sent: 4/27/2017 8:41:27 PM
To: Kaiser, Steven [kaiser.steven@epa.gov]; Joe Allegretti [joe@joeallegretti.com]; McCoy, Lisa [LMcCoy@idem.IN.gov]; Beth Admire [badmire@idem.IN.gov]
CC: Garypie, Catherine [garypie.catherine@epa.gov]; Kyte, Larry [kyte.larry@epa.gov]; Nelson, Leverett [nelson.leverett@epa.gov]; Toney, Marcy [toney.marcy@epa.gov]
Subject: RE: USS Lead - CONFERENCE CALL?

Steve:
Has today's conference call been cancelled?

Please let Joe Allegretti and I know.

Thanks,
Carla
City of East Chicago

From: Kaiser, Steven [kaiser.steven@epa.gov]
Sent: Tuesday, April 25, 2017 12:23 PM
To: Carla Morgan; Joe Allegretti; McCoy, Lisa; Beth Admire
Cc: Garypie, Catherine; Kyte, Larry; Nelson, Leverett; Toney, Marcy
Subject: USS Lead - Press

East Chicago press clips
US EPA Region 5 – prepared by the Office of Public Affairs
April 20, 2017

WaPo	**EPA chief makes first Superfund visit with Indiana stop**
	'Environmental racism is here': Indiana city 'bombarded by lead' confronts EPA chief
CNN	**EPA head visits community famous for lead contamination**
WTTW	**Scott Pruitt to East Chicago Residents: Chicago EPA Office Not Closing**
NWI Times	**East Chicago residents lay out demands ahead of EPA visit**
Chicago Sun Times	**Protesters march before EPA boss visits Indiana lead cleanup site**
HuffPo	**Scott Pruitt Visits A Polluted City That Could Be Crushed By EPA Budget Cuts**

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/energy-environment/epa-chief-to-tour-lead-contaminated-indiana-housing-complex/2017/04/19/e47a0a38-24f6-11e7-928e-3624539060e8_story.html?utm_term=.db0cee74a6ec

EPA chief makes first Superfund site visit with Indiana stop
By Sophia Tareen | AP By Sophia Tareen | AP
Energy & Environment
April 19 at 6:19 PM
EAST CHICAGO, Ind. — The head of the Environmental Protection Agency toured an Indiana public-housing complex on Wednesday where roughly 1,000 people were ordered evacuated because of lead contamination, his first visit to a Superfund site that some environmental advocates called a major leadership test.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt joined Indiana leaders including Gov. Eric Holcomb, U.S. Sens. Joe Donnelly and Todd Young, and East Chicago's mayor for closed-door meetings in an industrial corridor of Indiana roughly 25 miles from downtown Chicago. Pruitt is the first EPA administrator to visit the site, according to EPA officials. He met with residents and toured the complex where evacuations began last year.

"The reason I'm here is because it's important that we restore confidence to the people here in this community that we're going to get it right," he said in a roughly 90-second statement to reporters. "They can have the confidence that their land, their health is going to be secure in the long-term."

He said next steps were discussed, but he did not provide details and refused to take questions.

The visit, while praised by elected officials of both parties, drew protests.

Local residents and activists questioned Pruitt's motives. They called for reassurance of a thorough cleanup, additional testing and long-term support of residents.

Pruitt has criticized the EPA for overreach and President Donald Trump's administration has taken steps to roll back stricter environmental regulations put in place over the past eight years. Also, Trump has proposed cutting the EPA's budget by 31 percent, almost one-third, and eliminating more than 3,200 jobs, about 20 percent of the agency's workforce of 15,000.

An EPA employees union criticized Pruitt for the proposed cuts, saying they would threaten public health. Union leaders called for a Wednesday meeting with Pruitt, who as Oklahoma's attorney general sued the EPA more than a dozen times to challenge regulations opposed by the fossil fuels industry.

The meeting between Pruitt and residents was "intense," with people providing emotional first-person accounts, according to Robert Kaplan, acting regional administrator for EPA's Region 5 office in Chicago.

"They made pleas for assistance, for help," he said. "You really could have heard a pin drop in that room."

Cleanup efforts are underway. The EPA has set up shop at a now-empty school. Crews are replacing underground lead water pipelines. Environmental groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, want government officials to look at water quality citywide.

Two dozen families remain at the West Calumet Housing Complex, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Some 330 were living there when the mayor called last summer for residents to be relocated.

Officials began evacuating the 45-year-old complex, built on a site previously occupied by a lead-products factory, after soil tests found some yards with lead levels over 70 times the U.S. safety standard. Lead exposure, even at low levels, can cause nervous system damage and lowered IQs.

"We can't drink the water. The land we walk upon is contaminated. And we air we breathe is contaminated," said Thomas Frank, a resident of the community of roughly 30,000 who lives near the Superfund site.

Protesters snaked through streets of the largely black and Latino community where more than one-third of the residents live in poverty. They chanted and held signs reading, "East Chicago Demands Clean Water."

Eleven of the remaining families have found new homes and are in the process of moving, according to HUD. Thirteen other families are appealing their relocation offers from the city housing authority or have been given notice to move. Housing officials said their goal is to move out all families by May.

Resident Demetra Turner, 44, who left Chicago a decade ago for public housing in Indiana, said she was trying to find safe housing for the two children who live with her.

"We are truly in the fight of our lives," she said.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/20/environmental-racism-is-here-ind-city-bombarded-by-lead-confronts-epa-chief/?utm_term=.87f432f0993b

'Environmental racism is here': Indiana city 'bombarded by lead' confronts EPA chief

By Katie Mettler

Morning Mix

April 20 at 5:04 AM

For the first stop on his "back-to-basics" campaign tour — focused on rolling back environmental protections — EPA head Scott Pruitt chose a small Indiana town plagued by toxic levels of lead and arsenic.

On Wednesday, Pruitt toured the USS Lead Superfund site in East Chicago, Ind., listed as one of the nation's most contaminated in 2009, and promised city leaders and residents that they had the full support of his agency.

"The reason I'm here is because it's important that we restore confidence to the people here in this community that we're going to get it right," Pruitt told reporters in a 90-second statement at a news conference.

[East Chicago children have lead in their blood from contaminated dirt. Is this the next Flint?]

But he left the podium without taking any questions, and refused to address a rumor that the EPA's Region 5, which contains both East Chicago and Flint, Mich., could be on the federal government's funding chopping block.
And when a group of 100 protesters marched to the elementary school where Pruitt was speaking, carrying signs that said "PRUITT-GET2IT" and "WATER IS A HUMAN RIGHT," police blocked them from the property.
For nearly a year now, community leaders and residents in East Chicago, a predominantly black and Hispanic town of 29,000 people, have been fleeing the land they once considered home after tests showed dangerous levels of lead and arsenic had contaminated their soil and drinking water.
The crisis, though, has centered on the West Calumet public housing complex.
The homes there were built where a smelting facility operated for most of the 20th century. It turned refined copper and lead into batteries — and spewed dark, toxic dust across the land.
In 2009, decades after the factories closed, the EPA designated the area a priority cleanup site. Several years later, tests showed alarmingly high levels of lead, and a plan was made to haul away tons of contaminated soil.
But those plans stalled, and little was done until May 2016, nearly eight years after the first official red flag.
That month, East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland received test results from the EPA with elevated numbers his office claims he had never seen before.
Soon, signs posted across the complex warned parents to keep their children out of the dirt and wash all their outdoor toys. By the end of July, the Housing Authority announced that the land was so toxic the entire 346-unit complex had to be demolished — leaving 1,000 people, including 600 children, without homes.
"Somebody dropped the ball somewhere," state Sen. Lonnie Randolph, an East Chicago resident, told the Associated Press at the time. "Maybe it was intentional, or maybe by mistake. Maybe it was negligence."
A nearby elementary school was shuttered weeks before the school year began and the EPA set up office space inside.
Then the EPA notified state officials it had detected high levels of lead in 18 of 43 homes tested in East Chicago, reported the Times of Northwest Indiana. The lead in the water was unrelated to the lead in the soil, the local newspaper reported, but residents exposed to both could face extreme health risks.
Up to 90 percent of the city's water lines could be composed of lead pipes, according to the Times, and the EPA advised all residents to assume their water is contaminated and use a certified filter.
"We can't drink the waters. The land we walk upon is contaminated. And the air we breathe is contaminated," Thomas Frank, one of five East Chicago residents selected to meet privately with Pruitt, told the Chicago Sun-Times.
Rally organizers called for more water testing, expedited clean-up of the contaminated sites and lifelong health care for those exposed to the toxic soil and water, reported the Sun-Times.
"We are here in the West Calumet complex because injustice is here in East Chicago," the Rev. Cheryl Rivera said during the rally Wednesday. "We are here because environmental racism is here. We are here because climate injustice is here. We are here because thousands of families' lives are at risk."
The EPA this week began cleaning up homes in the Superfund site, which includes three separate zones, the public housing complex, the school and private residences.
Last month, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and other advocacy organizations petitioned the federal agency to give all residents of East Chicago — not just those in the Superfund site — water filters and bottled water, reported the Chicago Tribune, a request that is still being reviewed by EPA officials.
"Up to now, it's only been voluntary measures to try to get filters and bottled water to folks. When we filed the petition, the intent was to light a fire under the city," Meleah Geertsma, a Midwest-based senior attorney at the NRDC, told the environmental publication E&E News before Pruitt's visit. "Our main point is that the residents of East Chicago are being bombarded by lead in all directions."
In a news release, the EPA outlined actions it has already taken and will take this year, including giving East Chicago $16.5 million in federal State Revolving Fund money for drinking water infrastructure upgrades. The agency already handed out filters and bottled water to residents of some Superfund properties and will give water filters to all residents in zones 2 and 3 this year.
Cleanup work will resume in some areas now that the EPA got several "potentially responsible parties" to fund the work at an estimated $16 million, the release said. The agency will remove contaminated soil from at estimated 73 "high priority" properties and clean up the yards in an additional 120 properties.
Skeptics, though, are concerned that President Trump's proposed 31 percent EPA budget cut — which includes shrinking the Superfund clean-up program from over $1 billion to $762 million — could devastate those plans, especially if the Region 5 offices are trimmed back or cut altogether.

That rumor was reported by a Chicago Sun-Times columnist last week, citing an unnamed "city source." The source, the columnist wrote, said the Chicago-based office would be consolidated with one in Kansas. The region director has since denied the allegations, but when asked about it after the news conference Wednesday, Pruitt said nothing.
Frank told Chicago Tonight that during his private meeting with Pruitt, the EPA chief "categorically denied that they had any plans" to close the Region 5 offices.
Officials say two dozen families remain at the 45-year-old West Calumet housing complex. Those who already evacuated have been forced to live across state lines or in neighborhoods plagued by gang violence.
Mike Pence, Indiana's former governor and the current vice president, declined to declare a state of emergency in East Chicago. Newly elected Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb did earlier this year.
Local leaders have praised members of Indiana's congressional delegation, including Sens. Joe Donnelly (D) and Todd C. Young (R) along with Rep. Peter J. Visclosky (D), for putting East Chicago on the radar of federal officials.
Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson has pledged a visit of his own, though he has not said when it will occur.
"Maybe we're a poor community," April Friendly, with the community strategy group, told WGN. "It doesn't mean we can't be a heard community."

http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/19/politics/scott-pruitt-east-chicago-visit-epa/

EPA head visits community famous for lead contamination

By Rene Marsh, CNN
Updated 8:58 PM ET, Wed April 19, 2017
Lead poisoning forces Indiana residents out of homes 04:53

Story highlights

- East Chicago, Indiana is the first superfund site EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has visited
- It was listed on the "National Priorities List" of the worst contaminated hazardous waste sites in 2009

*(CNN)*Environmentalists say USS Lead Superfund in East Chicago, Indiana, is the poster child of environmental injustice. The people who live there are at risk of lead contamination at every turn. It's in their drinking water and it's in their soil. More than one thousand people were forced to evacuate, according to Debbie Chizewer at Northwestern Law School, who has worked very closely with the affected residents. A local school was shut down and a public housing complex was also evacuated after soil tests showed lead and arsenic contamination levels 228 times the amount the Environmental Protection Agency considers potentially hazardous to children.

It was the first superfund site EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has visited -- making a trip there Wednesday -- and the agency said he was the first administrator to visit this particular site. Pruitt visited "to discuss cleanup and hear directly from East Chicago residents affected by contamination in their community," the agency said in a press release.

At a press conference, local officials praised Pruitt for visiting the site.

The community is what's a called a legacy contamination site. It was listed on the "National Priorities List" of the worst contaminated hazardous waste sites in the country in 2009. The site includes part of the former USS Lead facility along with nearby commercial, municipal and residential areas, including the West Calumet public housing complex.

Read More

Barbara Bolling-Williams, state president of the Indiana branch of the NAACP, said she is cautiously optimistic following Pruitt's visit, but added that his visit comes with the threat of "a skinnier EPA budget, fewer regulations -- and rumors Chicago's regional EPA office could be shut down looms in the background."

The Trump administration's proposed budget calls for a 31% cut to the budget, including cuts to the agency's environmental justice program. The program is intended to support poor, often minority communities with severe environmental challenges.

One week ago, the local chapter of the NAACP said it invited Pruitt to a roundtable discussion on environmental justice, which happened Wednesday morning. In attendance were residents, NAACP national President Cornell Williams Brooks and community members. Pruitt skipped that event, and instead invited a group to a meeting of his own at a local school that was shut down as a result of the lead contamination in the community.

Bolling-Williams, who was invited to Pruitt's meeting, said: "Pruitt listened to all of our concerns but he did not offer any solutions."

She said her organization wants to see the EPA do more to protect the East Chicago community. The NAACP presented Pruitt with a list of demands, including a call for an executive order that would include a greater commitment to communities like East Chicago.

"We need them to commit to adjusting cleanup plan for the site. Instead of digging up two feet of contaminated soil for disposal, digging up eight feet. We want that soil to be disposed of properly so as not to cause further contamination, we want continued testing of the soil and ground water in this area and a commitment to ensure the residents exposed to the lead get the physical and mental health care they need for the rest of their life. That includes financial help to make sure that happens. "

EPA spokesman J.P. Freire told CNN in an email: "Forget about the politics. Administrator Pruitt was working for environmental justice by meeting with the real residents affected by lead contamination and by committing to get results."
In its press release, the agency laid out the accomplishments of its cleanup effort under Pruitt:

- East Chicago is receiving $16.5 million in EPA State Revolving Fund (SRF) funding for drinking-water infrastructure upgrades.
- EPA, the state and the city are working together to coordinate lead service-line replacement with cleanup work to expedite completion of the work and minimize disruptions.
- EPA provided 54 homes with filters and bottled water while Superfund work was underway at those properties in Zones 2 and 3. This year, Indiana will distribute filters to all residents in Zones 2 and 3.

The Natural Resources Defense Council told CNN that Pruitt has yet to respond to its request for more EPA assistance and oversight in the lead problem in East Chicago's drinking water. Those demands include: Oversight of East Chicago's ongoing attempts to improve its corrosion control treatment; expanded blood-lead level testing of children under age 7; bottled water and home water filtration systems to residents throughout the city and testing the city's drinking water to determine the extent of the contamination.

During his visit, Pruitt provided brief comments at a press conference in East Chicago but quickly exited without answering questions from reporters. The Agency's press release quoted Pruitt saying: "I'm focused on getting EPA back to the basics of protecting human health and the environment, and one of my top priorities is delivering real results for the people of East Chicago.'

Pruitt went on: "Since I was sworn in as administrator, funding has been secured for drinking water infrastructure upgrades in East Chicago, filters and bottled water have been provided to residents and cleanup of contaminated soil has resumed."

http://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2017/04/19/scott-pruitt-east-chicago-residents-chicago-epa-office-not-closing

Scott Pruitt to East Chicago Residents: Chicago EPA Office Not Closing
Alex Ruppenthal | April 19, 2017 5:50 pm
"He categorically denied that they had any plans to do that," said Thomas Frank, one of five East Chicago residents who met with Pruitt on Wednesday.

On Saturday, Chicago Sun-Times columnist Michael Sneed quoted an unnamed "city source" in reporting that the Trump administration "could be looking at closing the Chicago regional office" as part of proposed cuts to the EPA's budget. The Chicago office could be consolidated with another EPA office near Kansas City, Sneed reported.
On Wednesday, Pruitt refuted the report during a 45-minute meeting with East Chicago residents, Frank said.
But Pruitt did not address the topic while speaking briefly to the media following the meeting. After offering remarks about his visit, Pruitt was asked whether the EPA planned to close its Chicago office, but he walked away without answering.
As for Pruitt's meeting with residents at East Chicago's USS Lead Superfund site, Frank said he and four other residents shared their experiences dealing with the city's contaminated soil and water. Frank said though Pruitt listened carefully, he did not make concrete commitments about additional resources toward remediation efforts or other clean-up work.
"There was no back and forth," Frank said. "Each resident had a statement. There was no set commitment. He kind of responded to a few comments. He did say that this is not about money; it's about fixing the problem."
Prior to Pruitt's arrival, about 100 residents and activists held a rally and march to demand that the government provide the resources needed to clean up homes and address water and soil contamination.
Last month, the EPA announced it would begin remediation work on nearly 200 properties after securing $16 million from the parties responsible for the contamination, which includes high concenrations of lead and arsenic in the soil.
In September, East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland announced plans to demolish the West Calumet Housing Complex because of the contamination, leaving about 1,000 residents in search of new homes.
Follow Alex Ruppenthal on Twitter: @arupp

http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/east-chicago-residents-lay-out-demands-ahead-of-epa-visit/article_2b5d9c77-16e0-52c4-ad2b-6c0b9f55749f.html

East Chicago residents lay out demands ahead of EPA visit

- Sarah Reese sarah.reese@nwi.com, 219-933-3351
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  -
- Apr 19, 2017 Updated 11 min ago
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- EAST CHICAGO — Residents and their supporters railed against any cuts at EPA and demanded action to ensure those affected by the lead crisis are made whole as they prepared Wednesday for EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt's visit.

Meanwhile, representatives from various community organizations made their way inside Carrie Gosch Elementary School — closed to students last summer amid fears of lead contamination — to take residents' concerns to a delegation of state and federal officials.
NAACP President Cornell Williams Brooks said Pruitt and Gov. Eric Holcomb arrived Wednesday to address an environmental crisis "40 years in the making" in East Chicago, but President Donald Trump's budget plan contemplates gutting the EPA.
Brooks also cited concerns about rumors the administration also might be considering eliminating two of EPA's regional offices, including the Region 5 office that currently is overseeing cleanup efforts in East Chicago.
"The administrator and governor are arriving at a moment where the residents of this city, these cities, literally are watching or witnessing their children being poisoned by lead in the water, heavy metals in the soil, contamination in their homes," Brooks said.

Residents rally over health concerns

In the West Calumet Housing Complex, where 1,000 residents were ordered to leave last summer because of high lead levels in the soil, a group of residents and activists gathered. They held signs saying, "East Chicago demands clean water," and "Living wages on a living planet. Stop corporate greed. Fully fund the EPA."
EPA began a cleanup last year of lead- and arsenic-contaminated soil in the Superfund site, which includes the entire Calumet neighborhood. During a pilot study, the federal agency also found elevated levels of lead in drinking water at some homes. Lead in water and lead in soil are not related, and EPA has said that if up to 90 percent of the city's water lines are lead, all residents should use a certified filter.

Emails obtained in a Freedom of Information Act request showed EPA had a role in the city's decision to change the chemical it was using to control corrosion of lead pipes. An expert said the chemical the city was using actually could have increased lead releases.
Maritza Lopez, a Superfund resident, held up a multipage list of medications she takes daily to show those gathered at the NAACP news conference the effects of contamination in the neighborhood she has long called home.
Later, during a rally outside Carrie Gosch Elementary School, Lopez said she sought testing at the Mayo Clinic that showed she has lead, arsenic and another toxic metal in her bones.

Groups lay out demands

Brooks, surrounded by members of the NAACP, the Twin City Ministerial Alliance, the East Chicago/Calumet Coalition Community Advisory Group and the Community Strategy Group, laid out a list of demands.
Some of the same demands were included in a letter the CAG recently sent to Pruitt, asking EPA to commit to engaging more residents in its decision-making process; expedite a groundwater study at the Superfund site it recently began earlier than planned; adjust its remediation plans as needed following the release of a forthcoming public health assessment; grant a Safe Drinking Water Petition asking EPA to use its emergency powers to respond to its own discovery of elevated lead levels in the city's drinking water; ensure residents' health is adequately protected during soil cleanup and their properties are fully restored; and do more to address environmental injustices faced by East Chicago residents and other low-income communities of color around the U.S.
Instead of an executive order rolling back regulations requiring corporations to prevent contaminating the air, water and soil, Trump should issue an executive order protecting the residents of "Main Street" who are dealing with the consequences of lax environmental regulations, Brooks said.
"We stand at the side of anybody who supports the residents. We stand in the face of anybody who does not support these residents," he said. "We will not relent. We will not give up. We will ensure that this issue is before the public.
"Today is one step farther, one step forward, and we will not take a step back. We call upon the EPA administrator. We call upon the governor. We certainly call upon the president to take these reforms and weave them together in the context and on the back of an executive order for environmental justice," Brooks said.

http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/protesters-march-before-epa-boss-visits-indiana-lead-cleanup-site/

Protesters march before EPA boss visits Indiana lead cleanup site

Stefano Esposito

EAST CHICAGO, Ind. — Residents of a lead-contaminated public-housing complex in Indiana and environmental activists are protesting ahead of a visit by the head of the Environmental Protection Agency.
Chanting crowds weaved through streets of East Chicago on Wednesday near a Superfund site. Some held signs that read "East Chicago Demands Clean Water."
Roughly 1,000 people were ordered evacuated from the housing complex because of lead contamination. Evacuations began last summer. Officials say two dozen families remain at the 45-year-old complex, built on a site once occupied by a lead-products factory.
"We can't drink the waters. The land we walk upon is contaminated. And we air we breathe is contaminated," said Thomas Frank, a resident of the community of roughly 30,000 who lives near the Superfund site.
EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt is expected to tour the complex with Indiana officials, including Gov. Eric Holcomb and Sen. Todd Young, both Republicans, along with the local U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky and Sen. Joe Donnelly, both Democrats.
The visits come amid reports that Chicago's regional EPA office is one of two that would be axed by the Trump administration. But the acting director of that office has sent a memo to employees criticizing stories about the office closing as "pure speculation," according to a memo given to the Chicago Sun-Times and other media outlets.
"These stories are not true, are pure speculation, and undermine our ability to communicate with the public the real information we have," Bob Kaplan, acting regional administrator, wrote in a memo sent to staff on Monday. "Some of you may be aware that EPA has discussed new ways to better integrate our efforts with the states, as well as eliminate excess office space, so that we can be more effective and save money. At this time, our discussions have not veered into the subject of an office closure. Anyone stating anything to the contrary is spreading false information."
Some environmental advocates are calling Wednesday's visit a first major test of Pruitt's leadership.
Pruitt has criticized the EPA for overreach and President Donald Trump's administration has taken steps to roll back environmental regulations. Also, Trump has proposed eliminating EPA's budget by nearly one-third.

Eleven of the remaining families have found new homes and are in the process of moving, according to HUD. Thirteen other families are appealing their relocation offers from the city housing authority or have been given notice to move. Housing officials said their goal is to move out all families by May.
Resident Demetra Turner, 44, who left Chicago a decade ago for public housing in Indiana, said she was trying to find safe housing for the two children who live with her.
"We are truly in the fight of our lives," she said.
Residents and the Natural Resources Defense Council are calling for more support and testing. The EPA workers union wants a separate meeting with Pruitt.
Meanwhile, in Chicago, officials with the American Federation of Government Employees, along with U.S. Reps. Raja Krishnamoorthi and Jan Schakowsky, held a news conference to demand that Pruitt meet with office employees.
"We have a crisis — we have an agency that's already been cut to the bare bone," said John J. O'Grady, president of AFGE Council 238, the union that oversees all EPA unions nationwide.
O'Grady, talking to reporters at EPA's Region 5 office downtown, said EPA had about 18,000 employees nationwide in 1999 and now has about 15,000. That's before a proposed 31 percent budget cut, he said.
O'Grady, standing with Schakowsky and Krishnamoorthi, said such huge cuts would mean fewer EPA employees in the field to test water, air and soil — meaning less data and less ability to enforce existing laws.
"That means it's open season for any company or corporation wanting to dump," O'Grady said. "We've been there. That's why we have an EPA."
Contributing: Associated Press
AP story ran in multiple outlets:

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-4426026/The-Latest-Protesters-march-EPA-chief-Indiana-visit.html

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/scott-pruitt-epa-east-chicago-lead-crisis_us_58f77ddfe4b029063d35c558
POLITICS
04/19/2017 05:38 pm ET
Scott Pruitt Visits A Polluted City That Could Be Crushed By EPA Budget Cuts
He'll have to do better than a whirlwind trip to fix the lead crisis in East Chicago, Indiana.

By Joseph Erbentraut

To call Wednesday's visit by Scott Pruitt, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, in East Chicago, Indiana, highly anticipated would be putting it mildly.

Local residents are struggling with a lead contamination crisis that has left their unfiltered tap water undrinkable and forced hundreds of families to evacuate their homes due to toxic soil. The situation is so severe that Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb (R) declared a disaster emergency in February.

The predominantly low-income city is working to address the contamination issues, but community members and advocacy groups have said more resources are needed. They fear that the dramatic budget cuts proposed for the EPA — including the rumored closing of its Region 5 office in downtown Chicago — could potentially hinder cleanup efforts.

Hoping to catch Pruitt's attention, dozens of community members gathered for an "emergency rally" on Wednesday morning, many of them carrying signs declaring "East Chicago demands clean water.

While in town, Pruitt toured the epicenter of its lead crisis, the West Calumet housing complex. Built on the site of a former lead refinery in 1972, the complex has been part of a federally designated, 322-acre Superfund site since 2009.

Pruitt also met with government officials — including Holcomb, Sen. Joe Donnelly (D) and Sen. Todd Young (R) — and a small group of local residents. He then briefly addressed the media but took no questions, saying that the meeting had covered "concrete" steps to be taken to address the city's lead issues in an "efficient and effective way."

"It's the EPA's objective, and my objective, to make sure the people's health is protected here in East Chicago," Pruitt said.

Pruitt's remarks did not address the fate of the nearby Chicago EPA office, nor did he stop at that office. The American Federation of Government Employees Local 704, which represents some 1,000 EPA employees in the Midwest, had invited Pruitt to attend a lunch meeting there.

Michael J. Mikulka, president of Local 704, said the union never received a response to its invitation.

"Employees want to hear from the administration to dispel it or confirm it, rather than be on pins and needles wondering if they're going to lose their job," Mikulka said. "We wanted him to come for lunch and tell our employees the truth of the matter."

Ahead of his visit, environmental advocates said they were hopeful that the administrator's arrival might signal additional support for East Chicago's residents, although they also said they have yet to see any indications of pending action. Pruitt was also apparently missing in action at an environmental justice roundtable event on Wednesday in East Chicago that included NAACP president and CEO Cornell William Brooks.

Meleah Geertsma, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the groups behind the effort, noted that the EPA had yet to acknowledge the petition and that their requests for meetings on the lead crisis have been denied so far.

"East Chicago is a perfect example of the need for the specialized input and oversight of the EPA where there are concerns about the local and state response," Geertsma told HuffPost. "But we haven't heard anything that we should be excited about. There hasn't been any indication that we'll get additional commitments of additional help coming in for the city."

EPA officials did not respond to questions concerning the petition. In a statement, spokesman J.P. Freire said the agency is "focusing on getting results by improving environmental conditions and human health in places like East Chicago."

As for any plans to close the Chicago office, Robert Kaplan, the EPA's acting Region 5 administrator, called the reports "not true" and "pure speculation" in an email to employees. But other stories have said the agency has been instructed to eliminate two of its regional offices.
"Rather than focus on politicized rumors, we are working with residents to make sure they and their families can live in a safe and healthy environment," Freire's statement read.

The soil at the West Calumet housing complex in East Chicago, Indiana, contains high levels of lead and arsenic, putting all residents in danger.

Meanwhile, residents of the small, majority-minority city are still waiting for a solution.

Debbie Chizewer, a law fellow at Northwestern University's Environmental Advocacy Clinic, said the East Chicago residents she works with were excited about the high-profile visit, but still worried that cleanup efforts already underway will not go far enough.

"This has been neglected for far too long," Chizewer said, "and nothing has been enough yet for this community in terms of bringing their homes and properties back to a safe position. They are frustrated about that."

Advocates hope Pruitt's conversation with East Chicago residents might inspire him to act. "There's a hope that actually seeing the problems, meeting the people, seeing their stories and hearing their demands and concerns would turn even the coldest of hearts," Geertsma said.

The EPA is looking at a proposed 31 percent funding cut in the president's budget. Pruitt, who sued the agency 13 times as Oklahoma attorney general, has said he'd push back against certain reductions, including a 30-percent cut to the Superfund program — the same initiative that funded the initial cleanup efforts in East Chicago.

Sincerely,

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