



# Environmental Protection Network

## Resetting the Course of EPA

Building a Resilient, Collaborative, and Innovative  
EPA for the 21st Century

OUTSIDE

THINK

THE

BOX

*This paper is part of the [Resetting the Course of EPA](#) project by the [Environmental Protection Network \(EPN\)](#), a bipartisan network of more than 500 former EPA career employees and political appointees across the country who served under multiple Democratic and Republican administrations.*

*Resetting the Course of EPA outlines specific and actionable steps that EPA leadership can take to reset the course of the agency to address the most significant and pervasive threats to public health and our environment. As there is no single roadmap, EPN looks forward to collaborating with others to advance the dialogue around the future of EPA and set ideas into motion that will better protect the health and wellbeing of everyone.*

Additional Resetting the Course of EPA documents are available here:

<https://www.environmentalprotectionnetwork.org/reset>

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## Summary

EPA faces major challenges in achieving its mission in the 21st century, an era of rapid and profound change. EPA leadership needs to transform the agency into a more resilient, innovative, and collaborative institution, better able to sustain effective action and adapt to shifting conditions. Climate change, the need for sustained action to uproot systemic racism, a global pandemic, and other threats are already bringing about disruptive economic, societal, and technological change. The scale and pace of this change is deeply affecting human health and the natural environment. EPA must become more forward-thinking and more capable of confronting uncertainty and engaging change.

## Recommendations

1. **Design and implement integrated strategies within EPA.** EPA should institutionalize the use of cross-agency teams to address the most critical and complex challenges facing our country—taking coordinated actions across traditional program lines (e.g., air, water, waste) and functional roles (e.g., regulation/enforcement, scientific research, infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, emergency response). [\[Read More\]](#)
2. **Expand interagency collaboration.** A central element of a renewed, high-performing EPA is collaboration with federal, state, local, and tribal agencies that connect with and draw upon critical constituencies, policy frameworks, budgetary resources, and legal authorities. [\[Read More\]](#)
3. **Communicate better with the public.** The general public lacks a full understanding of what EPA does and how it benefits them. EPA needs to increase and strengthen its communications to explain clearly how agency activities protect people and their communities and to help people better understand and reduce health and environmental risks in their own lives. [\[Read More\]](#)
4. **Restore and enhance EPA’s reputation for reliable information.** One of the most rapidly changing areas of environmental protection is the landscape of environmental data, science, technologies, and information. The public needs and deserves ready access to data that documents health and environmental conditions and their impacts. EPA plays essential roles in ensuring the integrity of its data, and providing its data to the public in integrated, user-friendly formats. EPA must secure and maintain its reputation as the gold standard of environmental information while increasing its ability to provide the public useful information on how people can better understand and reduce health and environmental risks in their own lives. [\[Read More\]](#)
5. **Sustain an organizational culture of continuously improved performance.** The agency should value diversity and inclusion, and continuously seek and reward expertise, innovation, and ability. This type of culture enhances productivity, agency processes, institutional competency, and reliability. [\[Read More\]](#)

## Recommendation #1: Design and implement integrated strategies within EPA.

Increasingly, the environmental challenges of the 21st century require solutions that need analysis and action from multiple parts of EPA, and draw on the agency’s best capabilities across traditional program lines (e.g., air, water, waste, chemicals) and functional roles (regulation/enforcement, scientific research, infrastructure construction and funding, information dissemination, stakeholder collaboration, emergency response). Although it is challenging to establish well-functioning cross-agency teams in a “siloed” organization such as EPA—let alone interagency initiatives within the Executive Branch (see Recommendation #2)—EPA has sufficient experience with this approach to draw upon lessons learned and institutionalize them. Most importantly, integrated strategies within EPA must be implemented without wasting critical time on highly burdensome reorganizations.

### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Publicly announce the creation of a number of cross-agency teams in concert with an administration-wide commitment to break down the silos within and between federal agencies (see Recommendation #2) to collectively address the most critical and complex environmental and public health issues.
- ❖ Define different subjects for between five and ten cross-agency teams to address high priority, complex challenges. Topics for these teams could include: (1) a national problem (e.g., climate change, environmental injustice, nutrient water pollution); (2) an economic sector (e.g., food production, energy, changing distribution of goods with online commerce); (3) technology change implications (e.g., 3-D printing, environmental sensors, bio-based materials); and/or (4) place-based challenges.

### EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Define the scope and goals for these teams.
- ❖ Identify a lead Assistant Administrator or Regional Administrator for each of the teams.
- ❖ Indicate what EPA offices and other agencies will be responsible for participating on the teams.
- ❖ Make arrangements for appropriate resource support.
- ❖ Clarify with staff that this team model should operate in parallel with ongoing program activities that are effectively delivering results on agency priorities through existing organizational structures.

### FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Establish collaborations for and between the teams with relevant federal, state, local, tribal, and international authorities; business, environmental, academic, labor, and community organizations; and other stakeholders to help define issues and solutions and take coordinated actions as needed.
- ❖ Support the most successful of these teams, launch new teams, and create mechanisms to continuously look for more cross-agency issues and opportunities.

## Recommendation #2: Expand interagency collaboration.

EPA operates in a dense network of other federal agencies; state, local and tribal governments; industry; public interest groups; research institutions; and individual citizens. Collaboration with all of them is the best way to identify effective solutions to public health and environmental problems and support collective actions when possible. A central element of an emergent, high-performing EPA is collaboration with executive departments and agencies that draw upon critical constituencies, policy frameworks, budgetary resources, and legal authorities. Candidates for priority actions include the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Energy, Department of Transportation (DOT), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and others. Collaboration with states, local, and tribal governments also offer important opportunities.

### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Publicly announce the creation of an interagency/intergovernmental engagement council in concert with an administration-wide commitment to breaking down the silos within (see Recommendation #1) and between federal agencies to collectively address the most critical and complex environmental and public health issues of the century.
- ❖ Staff the council with Deputy Secretaries, co-led and facilitated by EPA’s Deputy Administrator and the Chief of Staff of the Council on Environmental Quality.

### EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Establish criteria for selecting and launching a set of high-profile interagency engagements and solicit ideas from career staff throughout the federal government.
- ❖ Require that proposals are shared with stakeholders outside of government to ground truth ideas and secure additional buy-in.
- ❖ Select a manageable set of five to six collaborations and support these efforts with initial funding.

### The following are examples of potential collaborative projects:

- ❖ *Climate Stabilization in Rural America.* Establish a joint USDA/EPA-lead prototype effort to develop a policy and budget framework to achieve nitrogen and carbon mitigation and sequestration over selected landscapes. Demonstrate and broadly deploy improved agricultural practices and technologies. Offer greater productivity/fertility to farmers through improved soil profile/soil organic material, plus societal flood and water quality benefits, in addition to climate mitigation.
- ❖ *Data and Information Improvement and Sharing.* Design and pilot improved environmental data/information sharing and presentation. Identify and engage a set of 3 states and 3-6 cities/counties. Establish data/information-sharing systems and tools that match community-based needs and preferences. Ground truth data via continuous customer interactions and lay a foundation for broader information sharing.
- ❖ *Climate Infrastructure.* Form a collaboration with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, DOT, DOD, and EPA to create new approaches to addressing infrastructure in the face

of catastrophic climate impacts—from enhanced stormwater management to anticipating the implications of expanding flood zones on Superfund sites.

- ❖ *Environmental Justice and Health.* Launch an EPA/National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences initiative to work with frontline community members to make scientific and technical information, as well as training and technical support, available and digestible to low-wealth communities, communities of color, and tribal and indigenous communities.

#### FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Request sufficient funding to begin to implement these collaborations in the FY2023 budget and subsequent budgets.
- ❖ Support the most successful of these collaborations, launch new teams, and create mechanisms to continuously look for more cross-agency issues and opportunities.

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### Recommendation #3: Communicate better with the public.

The resilience of a government agency like EPA requires the trust of its residents to ensure that its decisions and approaches are understood and accepted. It is essential that EPA demonstrates every day that its work benefits those living in the U.S. in tangible ways, and that its advice helps people better understand and reduce environmental risks they may face. EPA should adopt a sustained strategy to increase and strengthen its external communications, learning more about public concerns and questions, providing useful information and advice, and explaining how the agency’s work contributes to the health and safety of people and their communities.

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ EPA should significantly increase its grassroots engagement with community-based organizations, especially in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by pollution, and begin planning a series of collaborative sessions through which EPA will listen and learn which public health and environmental issues are priority concerns and where communities look for information about these topics.
- ❖ EPA should reassess the effectiveness of its [website](#), its use of multiple social media platforms, and other modes of communication in explaining the major objectives and activities of EPA programs and the actions individuals can take to evaluate environmental conditions and reduce exposure to pollution in their lives.

#### EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ While the COVID-19 pandemic will likely constrain some forms of public engagement, EPA should creatively pursue all available engagement approaches (e.g., online video meetings, telephone conferences, etc.). For individuals and communities without internet access, EPA should explore alternative avenues (e.g., through partnerships with broadband cooperatives) to gain their input.

## FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ After actively engaging with communities across the country, EPA should prepare a report on its findings, to be distributed broadly, that will inform future communication strategies and actions related to public engagement.
- ❖ EPA should improve its ability to: (1) explain the benefits of EPA programs; (2) provide practical advice on individual actions that protect public health; (3) adapt its communication strategies for particular issues or audiences; and (4) listen and make what EPA learns about public needs a core practice. The agency should consider reorganizing and expanding EPA website content on what individuals can do to protect their health and the health of their communities, and present EPA’s activities in ways that a broad audience will appreciate and identify with personally.

## Recommendation #4: Restore and enhance EPA’s reputation for reliable information.

EPA collects and retains a huge amount of data, which should be interpreted and conveyed in transparent, integrated, and user-friendly formats to help the public more fully understand environmental conditions and public health risks. In addition, EPA should expand and refine its metrics for measuring national progress on environmental protection and sustainability.

## IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ EPA should review information that has been removed from its website over the last few years, including information related to climate change, and make publicly available any information that remains scientifically valid and relevant to a public understanding of health and environmental challenges.
- ❖ EPA should review and upgrade its existing public-facing databases on facility environmental performance to provide greater data integration (e.g., linking the full range of facility-specific EPA data to the mapping formats established in [MyEnvironment](#)) and upgraded formats for portraying and analyzing these data, making the sites more robust and easier to use.

## EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ EPA should provide adequate funding and staffing for current initiatives aimed at providing ready public access to agency information about chemical toxicity, risk assessment tools, and environmental conditions (e.g., air, water, land, wildlife).

## FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ EPA should expand on current efforts to establish a core set of environmental indicators that will be used to measure environmental progress over time, and develop a strategy for improving the data available for those measurements. The agency should develop a formal process to report these indicators and data periodically to the public, consider them in the agency’s planning and budgeting,

and use this information as a basis for future collaborations with other government agencies and external stakeholders.

- ❖ EPA leadership should bolster existing efforts, such as the [EPA Report on the Environment and Climate Change Indicators in the United States](#), by publishing regular updates (every 6-12 months) and enhancing data gathering to fill critical gaps.

## **Recommendation #5: Sustain an organizational culture of continuously improved performance.**

EPA must continuously seek enhanced productivity, improved agency processes, and innovative ways to achieve program goals. It must value diversity and inclusion in its operations, develop structures and processes that encourage open communication, and create incentives for exercising leadership and initiative. EPA’s culture and actions need to encourage teamwork, trust, and continuous learning.

### **EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS**

- ❖ Review previous agency experience with efforts to streamline and improve internal processes that stress the involvement of front-line staff.
- ❖ Identify existing agency efforts to promote internal and external process improvement and signal support for those that are working.

### **FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS**

- ❖ Based on the review of prior efforts, redesign and refocus process improvement efforts to address the highest priority needs.
- ❖ Ensure the involvement of career staff in efforts to advance the agency’s mission and use its resources most effectively to solve major environmental problems.
- ❖ Reward managers for innovation and risk-taking.
- ❖ Focus on strengthening mechanisms and structures for addressing cross-agency management needs, and on supporting internal collaboration across program lines.
- ❖ Encourage teamwork, open communication, flexible rotational assignments, and innovation to tackle complex issues that will require EPA to draw on expertise from across the agency.
- ❖ Work with partners, on an ongoing basis, to identify innovative approaches to improve programs nationwide. (See EPN’s recommendations on “[Reimagining and Reframing the Boundaries of EPA’s State, Tribal, & Local Relationships](#).”)
- ❖ Charge national program managers to continually assess regional programs for best practices that can be shared with or replicated in other regions.
- ❖ Establish the expectation that programs and activities (including regulatory programs) will be evaluated regularly to assess their impact, identify potential improvements, and, when appropriate, disinvest. Dedicate resources to this function and reward self-evaluation.
- ❖ Recognize that organizational cultures don’t change overnight, but continue to evolve over time. Commit to periodically reviewing agency progress in developing continuous improvement.

## Participants in the EPN Workgroup

### Building a Resilient, Collaborative, and Innovative EPA for the 21st Century

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