

Letter to EPA Administrator Zeldin from former EPA Regional Administrators

April 17, 2025

The Honorable Lee Zeldin
Administrator
US Environmental Protection Agency
Sent via email

Dear Administrator Zeldin,

We are former EPA Regional Administrators from across the country who served in the previous administration. In these roles, we engaged with communities of every kind: urban, rural, suburban and tribal; mountains, plains, desert and coastal; and red, blue, and every shade of purple. Before working for the agency, we worked in state and local government, higher education, nonprofit organizations, and business. We have close ties to the people and communities of our nation and earned their trust in our common work to carry out the agency's mission, "to protect human health and the environment."

When you took the reins of the agency, you took an oath to uphold that mission. Yet, the opposite has ensued. From mass firings, to planned elimination of the scientific mission, dismantling the EJ office, and freezing grants, to the elimination of Congressionally mandated projects that will improve public health across this country – these actions all profoundly undermine the mission. These actions will have serious and irreparable impacts on the health and well being of the American people, and to the air, water and land we all depend on for our livelihoods and long-term economic development.

In our travels in the last three months we have met with mayors and moms, bus drivers and school teachers, doctors and state legislators, our former partners in state government, and families from every walk of life. They share the deep concerns and questions that are listed below about the new and dangerous direction that EPA is headed.

1. The EPA's core mission is to protect human health and the environment, NOT support polluters' bottom lines.

In March, when you announced the planned rollback of dozens of regulations, there was no focus on how these actions would improve human health and the environment, EPA's statutory mandate. Because these actions, in fact, will make our water, air and land dirtier, not cleaner, and increase rates of cancer, heart disease, asthma, lung disease and many other public health problems. When someone turns on the tap in their kitchen, they deserve to not worry about what is in that glass of water.

Question 1: What is your evidence that the actions you are planning at EPA will better protect human health and the environment?

2. Science is fundamental to the work of protecting human health and the environment, NOT a wasteful add-on.

Last month, it was revealed that EPA was planning to dissolve the Office of Research and Development and possibly lay off about 75% of its scientists. These are biologists, chemists, epidemiologists, hydrologists, and engineers focused on understanding how pollution impacts our lakes, streams, air and soils. Their job is to monitor the water Americans drink and the air we breathe. When EPA was created (by a Republican President, Richard Nixon, in the 1970s), Congress understood that world-class, dispassionate, evidence-based science would be the best tool to assure that our environment and public health is protected, while maintaining a vibrant economy. The destruction of the scientific core of EPA will lead to more pollution, more destruction of the environment on which we depend, and more sickness and disease and the economic costs associated with poorer health.

Question 2: What is your evidence that the activities of scientists at EPA is wasteful and/or does not serve the public interest?

3. EPA needs effective and efficient management, NOT chaos.

In various public settings, you have expressed support for career staff, retaining talent, and have expressed concern for backlogs and making sure functions are properly staffed. You also stated at the recent Environmental Council of the States (ECOS) meeting in Arlington, VA, that you “don’t want to lose one good employee.” However these words are contradictory to your actions, in which blanket and indiscriminate firings have been used.

Shortly after your swearing in, you placed hundreds of non-political employees on administrative leave or terminated them without management or legal justification. For months now, these employees have been getting paid, but you have instructed them to sit at home and do nothing. These are “good employees”, including PhDs, toxicologists, epidemiologists, infrastructure experts, and former military officers. Your plan to cut the agency by 65% will leave a skeletal organization unable to be responsive to the people EPA is supposed to serve – state partners, municipalities, communities, families and industry. And as the courts have now required you to return terminated employees to work, you still have them on administrative leave where they continue to stay home while receiving a paycheck. Furthermore, plans of a major reduction in force and consolidation of Regional offices would undoubtedly hamper the ability to be responsive and provide services. An understaffed and under-resourced agency is an ineffective and inefficient agency.

Question 3: How many thousands of hours and how many millions of dollars in salary payments has EPA spent for staff that you have instructed not to work? Please also share with us the hundreds of stranded or delayed projects and their locations that are the result of these actions, and further such impacts that would result from the proposed reduction in force.

4. EPA has a duty to protect low-income and highly polluted places, NOT let them become even more overburdened.

At the same ECOS meeting, one of your first topics was environmental justice, and concern for people living in communities most overburdened by pollution. You expressed an interest in prioritizing resources to “remediating the problem” rather than other types of spending. Again, the gulf between your words and actions could not be greater. One of your first actions was to place anyone working on environmental justice on leave, precisely those charged with remediating the problem. You then prohibited staff from engaging in “environmental justice” work. The lion’s share of work that EPA does — and needs to expand — is in the places most overburdened by concentrations of pollution sources. Why? Because this is where investments in environmental protection have the biggest bang for the buck. These include communities of color and predominantly white communities, both urban and rural and Tribal Nations. They are the places with the most polluted air, water, and soils and with the lowest income and the highest rates of cancer, heart attacks, childhood asthma, and birth defects. Residents in these communities have stated that their calls are not getting returned and initiatives to “remediate the problem” in their neighborhood have been canceled.

Question 4: How do you justify abandoning the most polluted communities in our country? Please explain how you will address the acute public health concerns that persist in these places when you have removed the staff and prohibited environmental justice duties from being performed.

5. A diverse and inclusive workplace leads to more productivity and support for Americans who want clean air and clean water, eliminating DEIA will lead to discrimination and unfair allocation of benefits to communities.

The elimination of “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” has been needless and harmful, and not based on evidence of “illegal” activity. These efforts are not a bias, but the opposite — they help ensure that we treat people - staff and the communities they serve - fairly. Much of that programming was to educate staff about things like workplace disability laws, outreach to minority institutions, and have everyone feel like a member of the team regardless of their background. This is basic human decency *and* Management 101. The employee satisfaction scores and productivity of the staff were at all-time highs by the time we transitioned from our posts. Undoubtedly, they are plummeting with each passing week. And despite the rhetoric that these efforts were “illegal,” there have been no lawsuits, complaints, or other grievances from the public or the EPA workforce. On the contrary, these efforts were widely embraced wherever we went and enabled us to focus on and invest in rural, underserved communities, including those in conservative, less populated areas that have long been neglected. We were helping to rebuild their water systems, clean up toxic sites, and help revitalize these communities.

Question 5: Can you provide any legal decision that indicates any DEIA or environmental justice program at EPA was illegal?

6. Grants required by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act are needed and effective investments for American communities, families and businesses, NOT a waste of taxpayer money.

In justifying the cancellations of hundreds of community grants, you claim to be weeding out “waste, fraud, and abuse.” However, you have not cited a single specific example. Not one.

These grants were directed by Congress, were competitively bid, reviewed under highly scrutinized, audited, and time tested procedures of the Grants and Debarment Office. These grants followed the letter of the law and our system relies on the rule of law to function and remain legitimate in the eyes of Americans. Acting in an arbitrary and capricious way endangers that legitimacy. As a former Member of Congress yourself, we are certain you understand that acts of Congress are the law of the land, and federal agencies cannot independently and arbitrarily decide which acts they want to follow and which they do not. In addition, if ferreting out waste, fraud and abuse was really a priority you would have not have allowed the firing of the EPA Inspector General, whose job is to independently investigate EPA’s compliance and effectiveness in carrying out environmental laws. The IG’s work is relentless, informed, and comprehensive, generating thoughtful – and transparent – light on the work of the people for the public to see. The Office of Inspector General has produced thousands of reports on EPA’s programs. We encourage you to become familiar with them. The reports are available for anyone to read [here, online](#).

Question 6: Can you provide any specific evidence of waste, fraud, or abuse in these grants? Please provide a legal justification for how an Executive branch agency can ‘pick and choose’ which acts of Congress to implement. Please provide a detailed explanation of how your team will conduct independent audits and reviews that the EPA Inspector General was charged with.

7. Environmental protection and economic development go hand-in-hand, they are NOT conflicting.

On January 1, 2025, America was prosperous. The S&P 500 exceeded 6,000, its highest in history. GDP exceeded \$29 trillion, also the highest in history. America could claim the most thoughtful environmental protections and greatest investment in infrastructure and toxic cleanups in history. Clearly, America can be both prosperous and environmentally responsible. Recent rhetoric about basic environmental protections being a barrier to business is demonstrably false. Pollution is a major cost: it makes people sicker, makes places less desirable, makes business inefficient, and makes the public have to pay to clean up someone else’s mess. In contrast, addressing pollution drives technological innovation, green job growth, and redevelopment opportunities. Most members of industry want to be good neighbors. It is the few bad actors who don’t. EPA’s new posture rewards bad actors at the expense of the public — and we have never met a single person who wanted the EPA to allow more pollution in their neighborhood.

Question 7: Can you explain why you believe Americans are unable to be both prosperous and environmentally responsible?

In the regions across this country, we have worked on the ground with all kinds of people and communities. Everywhere we went and everyone we talked to, including hundreds of Republican leaders at the state and local levels, have consistently sought EPA’s partnership to protect public health. In fact, polls show broad bipartisan support for the agency. While we recognize and respect

the ebb and flow of elections, the current approach risks undermining the agency's essential work rather than thoughtfully addressing the public's needs or even attempting to create greater efficiencies (as are undoubtedly needed). The integrity of the EPA should not be sacrificed to political shifts; its mission to protect human health and the environment must remain steadfast.

Like you, Administrator William Ruckelshaus had also been a Republican member of Congress. He was appointed by President Nixon as EPA's first Administrator and confirmed by a Democratic Senate in another divided political era 55 years ago. As Administrator, he addressed the Cuyahoga River fires and banned DDT. He returned to the post in 1983 — again by a Republican President and confirmed by a Democratic Senate— where he restored the neutrality of the agency and led the effort to ban asbestos among other achievements. His [career](#) and [EPA legacy](#) are remarkable and worthy of study.

Administrator Ruckelshaus was adamant about keeping politics out of the agency and making fidelity to science, law, and public health its guiding values. He is the George Washington of EPA. His two portraits hang in the hallway outside of your office.

We ask you to lead the Agency and its workforce with the respect and dignity they deserve. We ask you to respect your staff, trust your scientists and experts, and in the spirit of Administrator Ruckelshaus, return EPA to its noble mission and to support the public servants who selflessly carry out the task of protecting communities all across this country. The American people are depending on you.

Sincerely,

David Cash, former Region 1 Administrator (New England)

Lisa Garcia, former Region 2 Administrator (New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands)

Adam Ortiz, former Region 3 Administrator (Mid-Atlantic)

Daniel Blackman, former Region 4 Administrator (Southeast)

Debra Shore, former Region 5 Administrator (Great Lakes)

Meg McCollister, former Region 7 Administrator (Heartland)

Martha Guzman, former Region 9 Administrator (Southwest)