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## Scott Pruitt's Dirty Politics

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One afternoon last April, Scott Pruitt, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, travelled to the Harvey Mine, in Sycamore, Pennsylvania, to declare that the agency had a new direction, which he called “Back to Basics.” It was an unusual place for the nation’s chief steward of clean air, land, and water to set out a policy agenda. Consol Energy, the owner of the Harvey facility, which is part of the largest underground coal-mining complex in North America, has been fined repeatedly by the E.P.A. for violations; in 2016, it had to pay three million dollars for having discharged contaminated wastewater into the Ohio River and its tributaries. Past E.P.A. administrators have spoken of creating jobs as a welcome potential by-product of the agency’s work, especially if they are green jobs, but creating or protecting energy jobs is not supposed to be the mission—protecting human health and the environment is. As the speech that Pruitt gave at the mine demonstrated, he seems to have these priorities reversed.

Pruitt, who is forty-nine, looked cheerful, as he generally does at public appearances. (He declined my requests for an interview.) Unlike many people who have joined the chaotic Trump Administration, he seems unconflicted about his new role, his ideological and career goals fitting together as neatly as Lego blocks. The former attorney general of Oklahoma, Pruitt ascended politically by fighting one regulation after another. In his first year at the E.P.A., he has proposed repealing or delaying more than thirty significant environmental rules. In February, when the White House announced its intention to reduce the E.P.A.’s budget by twenty-five per cent—one of the largest cuts for any federal agency—Pruitt made no objections. His schedule is dominated by meetings and speaking engagements with representatives of the industries he regulates. He has met only a handful of times with environmental groups.

At the Harvey mine, Pruitt wore a solid-red tie and, on his lapel, an American-flag pin; he briefly put on a white hard hat inscribed with the phrase “Make America Great Again.” He delivered his remarks in a sterile, fluorescent-lit room, a contrast with the audience, which was filled with miners in coal-dusted uniforms. He spoke in a precise staccato that was softened by the light Southern accent of his native Kentucky. In the speech, which Pruitt gave before touring the mine, he said, “I’m looking forward to puttin’ on those suits you’ve got on, goin’ down, and checkin’ it out and havin’ *fun* doing so.” He joked that whoever said you can’t have your cake and eat it, too, didn’t know “what you’re supposed to *do* with cake.” He insisted that you could, in fact, roll

back regulations on industries like coal while taking care of the environment. But he did not point out that, as many economists have indicated, the availability of cheap natural gas has done more to eliminate coal jobs than environmental regulations have. (A month earlier, Bloomberg News had reported that Consol planned to sell off, or otherwise terminate, its coal businesses, in order to focus on extracting natural gas.)

It's an open secret in Washington that Pruitt would like to become Attorney General if President Trump fires Jeff Sessions, and at the E.P.A. he often sounds like he's trying out for that post, repeating a set of talking points, honed in conservative legal circles, about the dangers of "federal overreach." In Pennsylvania, Pruitt told the miners, and a contingent of corporate executives, that "the days of our agency declaring war on your industry are over." He went on, "It's not right for government to do that." Many of his comments that day sounded like rallying cries. "You guys are a *handsome* crew!" he declared. "The cavalry's on the way!"

In June, Pruitt joined Trump in the White House Rose Garden as Trump announced that the United States was withdrawing from the Paris climate accord. Although there is a consensus among scientists that human activity is causing climate change, Pruitt is skeptical of this view; unlike Trump, who has called global warming a "hoax" created by the Chinese, Pruitt expresses his dissent with deliberate mildness. Last March, he told CNBC, "Measuring with precision human activity on the climate is something very challenging to do." He went on, "I would not agree that it's a primary contributor to the global warming that we see. But we don't know that yet. We need to continue to debate, continue the review and analysis." The E.P.A., he has said, will commence a "red team–blue team" review of climate-change science that puts "experts in a room and lets them debate."

At an event hosted by the Federalist Society in November, Pruitt said, "I've been asking the question lately, 'What is *true* environmentalism?' . . . From my perspective, it's environmental stewardship, not prohibition." He added, "We have been blessed, as a country, with tremendous natural resources." Previous E.P.A. administrators, he said, had promoted an inflexible philosophy of "Do not touch."

The agency was established in 1970, by President Richard Nixon. William Ruckelshaus, its first administrator, who also led the E.P.A. under Ronald Reagan, told me, "My principal concern is that Pruitt and the people he's hired to work with him don't fundamentally agree with the mission of the agency. They seem more concerned about costs associated with regulations." Myron Ebell, a climate-change skeptic who headed Trump's transition team for the agency, praised Pruitt for concentrating on "the E.P.A.'s statutory responsibilities" and for "dropping many discretionary activities that have taken up more and more of the E.P.A.'s budget and staff time in recent years." Pruitt argues that every E.P.A. action should be specifically grounded in a federal statute such as the Clean Air Act—fifty-four-year-old legislation that was last amended in 1990.

Pruitt and his admirers call this approach "E.P.A. originalism"—a nod to the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, and his reading of the Constitution. The idea is that Pruitt is sticking to "traditional" priorities, such as cleaning up Superfund sites and contaminated drinking-water

supplies, rather than focussing on newer and broader environmental threats, such as climate change.

One problem with “E.P.A. originalism” is that neither our scientific knowledge nor the environment itself remains static. Rivers no longer catch fire, as the Cuyahoga, in Ohio, did repeatedly in the fifties and sixties; the skies over Los Angeles are no longer choked with brown smog; acid rain is no longer the threat it was to rivers, lakes, and wildlife; gasoline for cars is no longer made with lead, which damages children’s brain development. This progress was achieved, in no small part, because of the discretion that the E.P.A. has used to interpret laws as new ecological challenges, and new scientific understandings, arise. Every year, advancements in toxicology, technology, and epidemiology suggest new remedies. Ruckelshaus told me that it is self-defeating to insist on binding all environmental policy to the science of the past. He said, “We’ve cleaned up a lot of pollution—the air is much better, though we have three times the number of autos on the road. While you see pictures of Beijing—that doesn’t happen here anymore. Americans have the impression that because the smell-touch-and-see kind of pollution is gone, or not as intense, that we’ve dealt with the problem for good. But the environment is something you have to stay everlastingly at. Or it gets worse again.”

Under Pruitt, even the dirtiest forms of pollution are getting a reprieve. On February 2, 2014, as much as thirty-nine thousand tons of coal ash began spilling into the Dan River from a Duke Energy power plant in Eden, North Carolina. Like many utilities, the Dan River Steam Station had recently transitioned from coal combustion to natural gas, which is cheaper. But the plant still had waste ponds containing more than a million tons of coal ash; the ponds were separated from the river by an earthen dam. When a guard made his rounds that day, he noticed that the water level in the ponds was rapidly dropping, as though someone had opened a bathtub drain.

A sixty-year-old pipe leading under the ponds to the river had collapsed. By the time Duke Energy engineers sealed the pipe, nearly seventy miles of the Dan River had been fouled with coal ash laden with arsenic, lead, mercury, and selenium. The river, ordinarily a greenish-brown color, now resembled milky tea, and a drab sludge slathered its banks. Amy Adams, an organizer with a group called Appalachian Voices, who went down the river in a kayak after the spill, recalls navigating through “oozing sandbars of slag.” The Dan provides the drinking water for half a dozen communities in North Carolina and Virginia. According to the E.P.A., pollutants in coal-ash wastewater can cause “severe health and environmental problems in the form of cancer and non-cancer risks in humans, lowered I.Q. among children, and deformities and reproductive harm in fish and wildlife.”

Coal ash is one of the most prevalent forms of industrial waste. Although it can be recycled to make concrete and other products, or stored in landfills far from waterways, it is more typically mixed with water to create a slurry, then sluiced into holes in the ground. The holes are often unlined and adjacent to rivers, because steam electric plants need to be near bodies of water. Frank Holleman, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, said, “It’s about the most primitive way you can imagine to deal with industrial waste.”

The Dan River spill was the result of neglect: Duke Energy engineers had recommended installing video cameras, at a cost of twenty thousand dollars, to monitor pipe corrosion, but they were ignored. In 2015, Duke Energy subsidiaries pleaded guilty to nine misdemeanor violations of the Clean Water Act, including the unlawful discharging of coal ash, and paid a sixty-eight-million-dollar criminal fine, plus thirty-four million to fund environmental conservation.

Other coal-ash ponds have caused even bigger calamities. In 2008, a dike at a Tennessee Valley Authority power plant gave way, releasing more than a million tons of coal ash, and contaminating two rivers. The T.V.A. has spent about a billion dollars cleaning up the mess. Kenneth Kopocis, a former senior E.P.A. official, told me that it was hard to think of a more foolish policy than allowing coal-ash ponds to remain next to rivers: “They *are* going to fail. And when they do they create disasters that imperil drinking water and human health, and cost hundreds of millions of dollars to clean up.” Even when coal-ash ponds don’t fail spectacularly, they leak toxins into groundwater. Avner Vengosh, of Duke University, uses geochemical tracers to help identify coal-ash contaminants, and a research team led by him has found evidence of leaking in all twenty-two ponds that it has examined.

Recent technological changes have caused the wastewater produced by coal-fired power plants to become even more toxic. Some of the worst wastewater is discharged by “wet scrubbers,” which remove pollutants from smokestack emissions. Holleman, the attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center, said, “I like to say they’re using twenty-first-century technology to take pollutants out of the air and thirteenth-century technology to put it in the water. But someone told me I was insulting the thirteenth century.”

Coal-fired power plants are often found in rural, low-income areas, some of which rely on private wells. Walnut Tree is a predominantly African-American community near another Duke Energy power station in North Carolina. For years, coal ash from the Belews Creek Steam Station fell like snow on the town’s modest houses and back-yard vegetable gardens. Kids wrote their names in the ash that blanketed their parents’ cars and corroded the paint. David Hairston, a Walnut Tree resident turned activist, told me, “A lot of these people can’t afford to move. The resale value is no good.” A 2007 study prepared for the E.P.A. found that people living near coal-ash disposal sites face an increased risk of developing cancer.

Although utility companies know that coal-ash ponds pose enormous liability risks, they often delay removing them until they are sued by environmentalists. Last summer, after one such lawsuit, a federal district court ordered the T.V.A. to remove the ash from an unlined four-hundred-and-seventy-six-acre pond adjacent to the Cumberland River. Judge Waverly Crenshaw declared that the T.V.A. must stop covering over “decades-old mistakes.” (The T.V.A., appealing the decision, has proposed to do just that: cover the pond with concrete.)

Although Pruitt argues that the E.P.A. has become too hasty and radical in its responses, it agonized over the coal-ash problem for years, to the point that environmental groups sued it for inaction. In 2014, the agency finally issued a regulation—one that was hardly extreme. Kopocis, the former E.P.A. official, said that the agency “worked very hard to listen to industry’s concerns.” The rule did not mandate that power-plant operators close coal-ash ponds (though it

specified how this could be done safely). Instead, it laid out requirements for lining them, monitoring groundwater, and conducting structural-stability assessments. E.P.A. regulators did not classify coal ash as hazardous waste, a step that would have triggered stricter policy, largely because they wanted to make it easier for power companies to sell the ash for recycling. The new rule didn't apply to ponds on sites where power was no longer being produced, even though they are just as likely to leak, and it was "self-implementing," meaning that if companies didn't comply the only redress was a lawsuit.

"The rule was *very* weak," Peter Harrison, an attorney with Earthjustice, a conservation organization, said. "Still, this industry was so far above the law that there were no federal regulations at all before 2014. It was left to states, and many of them went out of their way to exempt coal ash from their rules. In that sense, it was an improvement." Frank Holleman told me, "E.P.A.'s rule wasn't the most stringent, but at least it established some minimum national standards." He went on, "Utilities are the most powerful political force in the state capitals, so state enforcement agencies are always very reluctant to require them to do anything."

In 2015, a much stronger regulation, the Effluent Limitations Guidelines rule, set new caps on the amount of toxic metals and other harmful contaminants that coal-fired steam electric power plants could sluice into ponds or discharge into waterways. (Under the Clean Water Act, plants can apply to the E.P.A. for permits to discharge some wastewater.) These limits hadn't been revised since the early eighties, and advances in water treatment had made it much easier, and cheaper, to extract toxic metals. Elizabeth Southerland, who worked on the Effluent Limitations Guidelines, served in the E.P.A.'s Office of Water until July, when she resigned. She told me that power plants that adopted new extraction technology could drain coal-ash ponds for a relatively low cost, by treating the pond water, jettisoning the liquid, and sending the remaining ash to landfills or recycling centers. "This was a classic case where addressing pollution at the source is orders of magnitude less expensive than dealing with it once it's been released into the environment," Southerland said. The E.L.G. rule gave power companies eight years to comply. The industry might not have been enthusiastic, but it was prepared.

Companies also had a financial incentive: demand for recycled coal ash was high. Because there are few such recycling facilities in the U.S., concrete manufacturers have been importing coal ash from China, India, and Poland. A recent report from the Carolinas Ready Mixed Concrete Association concluded that the market "was greatly underserved." Duke Energy is storing more than a hundred and fifty million tons of coal ash in North Carolina alone. Building new recycling facilities could create new jobs.

Trump, in his campaign, promised to rebuild the coal industry. At one point, he told Fox News' Chris Wallace that he planned to eliminate what he'd once called "the Department of Employment Prevention," saying, "We're going to have little tidbits left, but we're going to take a tremendous amount out." Soon after Pruitt became the head of the E.P.A., he announced that the agency would "reconsider" the E.L.G. rule. He said that he was "implementing President Trump's vision of being good stewards of our natural resources, while not developing regulations that hurt our economy and kill jobs."

In September, Pruitt responded to petitions from a lobbying organization, the Utility Solid Waste Activities Group, and a power company called A.E.S. Puerto Rico, which complained that even the weak 2014 coal-ash rule was causing “adverse impacts on coal-fired generation,” because of “the excessive costs of compliance.” Pruitt agreed that it was “in the public interest” to reconsider the 2014 rule as well.

On March 1st, Pruitt announced a proposal for a new coal-ash rule that would supplant all Obama-era regulations. An agency announcement promised that this approach would “save the utility sector up to a hundred million dollars per year in compliance costs.” Among other changes, Pruitt’s rule allows each state to decide how companies must remediate spills and leaks, how often they must test for groundwater contamination, and where they may place coal-ash ponds. Pruitt said that the new rule allows states to “incorporate flexibilities.” The rule added boron to the list of chemicals that must be monitored, which pleased environmentalists, but Southerland told me that the other changes effectively undermined “all the protective processes in the 2015 rule,” because “most states will undoubtedly choose” weaker standards. Even worse, the agency’s detailed proposal for the new rule states that it also plans to consider allowing power plants to implement their own compliance programs, which would operate “without the intervention of a permitting authority.”

No wonder the mood at a recent meeting of the American Coal Ash Association, in Sarasota, Florida, was so upbeat. The luncheon speaker was Alex Epstein, an Ayn Rand devotee who runs a think tank called the Center for Industrial Progress. His talk, “The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels,” ran long, but the audience didn’t seem to mind. People laughed appreciatively when he showed a video of himself wearing an “I ♥ Fossil Fuels” T-shirt at a climate-change march in New York City. Lisa Evans, an Earthjustice attorney, attended the conference. “The atmosphere was confident to the point of snarkiness,” she said. “It was, like, ‘We are getting a new rule, and we wrote the playbook for the E.P.A. on it.’ ”

Pruitt was not an early enthusiast for Trump. He advised Jeb Bush in the primaries, and in a February, 2016, [radio interview](#)—recently discovered by a watchdog group called Documented—he said of Trump, “He has tendencies that we see in emerging countries around the world, where he goes to the disaffected, those individuals, and says, ‘Look, you give me power and I will give voice to your concerns.’ And that’s a dangerous place to be.” Trump, he added, would be “more abusive to the Constitution than Barack Obama.”

For Pruitt, this was saying something, because after being elected Oklahoma’s attorney general, in 2010, he had spent much of his time battling Obama. In 2014, George F. Will described Pruitt, admiringly, as “one of the Obama Administration’s most tenacious tormentors.” A year later, the magazine *Governing* [noted](#), “Whenever states go to court against the Obama Administration, the chances are that Pruitt is somehow involved.”

Scott Pruitt was born in Danville, in central Kentucky, and grew up in Lexington. His father owned steak houses, and his mother was a homemaker. He graduated from a small Christian school in Kentucky, Georgetown College; in 1990, he moved to Oklahoma to attend law school, at the University of Tulsa, and stayed on after getting his degree. Oklahoma voters first got to

know him as a state senator from Broken Arrow, a Tulsa suburb. He served two terms, and was a member of the American Legislative Exchange Council, or *alec*, a conservative organization that drafts model legislation, with backing from Koch Industries and other corporate donors. In 2003, he told *Governing* that *alec* “puts legislators and companies together, and they create policy collectively.”

Kenneth Corn, a former Democratic state senator who served alongside Pruitt, described him as “very ambitious, and always sort of running for something else.” Pruitt was firmly opposed to abortion, and a leader in a Republican effort to put limits on workers’ compensation. He sponsored a bill that would require drug tests for workers who suffered on-the-job injuries or accidents resulting in damage to an employer’s property. Workers’-compensation reform didn’t pass until the Republicans took over the State Senate, in 2008, after Pruitt had moved on. Still, Corn said, “Scott helped shape the Republican message on that issue. And it helped him raise money later.”

In 2003, after an unsuccessful run for Congress, Pruitt bought a share in a Triple-A baseball team, the Oklahoma City RedHawks. To buy the RedHawks, Pruitt—at that time a thirty-five-year-old state senator with a salary of \$38,400—partnered with Robert Funk, the founder of an employment-agency company and a prominent Republican donor. Pruitt and Funk bought the RedHawks for a reported \$11.5 million, breaking the record for a minor-league team, and sold it in 2010, for an undisclosed profit.

As a co-owner of the RedHawks, Pruitt frequently showed up on local media to promote the team. He and his wife, Marlyn, lived with their children, McKenna and Cade, in Broken Arrow, where they belonged to the First Baptist Church, a congregation with its own YouTube channel and live-streaming services. Politico recently reported that in 2005, when Pruitt was interviewed by a Tulsa radio station, he remarked that there weren’t “sufficient scientific facts to establish the theory of evolution.”

Keith Gaddie, a political scientist at the University of Oklahoma, said that in those years Pruitt was “a very positive, guy-next-door type.” But in 2010 he ran for attorney general as a “hard-edged, Tea Party-type guy.” Pruitt cast himself as a warrior for state sovereignty, and as a champion of religious liberty. He liked to talk about a 1997 trip that he’d taken to Romania, on a Baptist mission. He’d learned that, under Communism, Christians had been free to worship in churches, but not elsewhere in public. Such oppression was imminent in this country, he warned. His campaign literature cited liberties that he would uphold: the right “to be born,” to keep and bear arms, to decline health insurance, to “drive a car different than the one Washington thinks you should drive,” and to reject “confiscatory environmental regulations based on junk science.” When he spoke at a 2014 *alec* meeting, he looked genial as he stood at the lectern and peered over his reading glasses, but his rhetoric was martial: thanks to Obama Administration regulations, Pruitt told the audience, Americans were “in the midst of a constitutional crisis.”

These aggressive stances resonated in deep-red Oklahoma, and he handily defeated his Democratic opponent. Pruitt was reelected four years later, and he began building a national profile. He was twice elected president of the Republican Attorneys General Association, an

organization that attracts corporate donations from ExxonMobil, the American Petroleum Institute, and other entities that he is now in charge of regulating at the E.P.A.

He created a new “federalism unit” in the attorney general’s office, intended to combat “systemic overreach” by the federal government. As attorney general, he was notably litigious, but in his most high-profile lawsuits he did not often prevail. In 2015, he defended the placement of a monument to the Ten Commandments on the statehouse grounds. The Oklahoma Supreme Court ruled against Pruitt, by a 7–2 vote. Brady Henderson, the A.C.L.U. attorney who argued the other side of the case, recalled that Pruitt borrowed the “scripts of conservative think tanks.” Henderson continued, “They kept fighting the challenge as though it were an atheist or an agnostic who was suing, and as though it were a First Amendment case. But our lead plaintiff was a Baptist minister!”

On other occasions, Pruitt lost when he set aside his commitment to state sovereignty. In 2014, Oklahoma joined five other farm states to challenge a California law requiring that eggs sold there come from chickens kept in cages big enough to let them extend their wings. Pruitt disparaged the law, saying, “It’s almost like having a cage that’s air-conditioned, and they can do yoga.” A district-court judge in California dismissed the lawsuit. In 2016, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a case that Pruitt and Nebraska’s attorney general, Doug Peterson, had brought against Colorado for legalizing marijuana. The Justices offered no comments, but it seems likely that the majority didn’t see how the law was Oklahoma’s or Nebraska’s business, even if they are Colorado’s neighbors.

In 2011, Pruitt filed a lawsuit challenging the Affordable Care Act, relying on arguments about states’ rights generated by the Cato Institute. He got a favorable ruling from a district court in Oklahoma, but the Supreme Court upheld the law. However, in February, 2016, Pruitt shared in a noteworthy success at the Supreme Court. In a 5–4 decision, the Justices issued a stay on enforcing the Clean Power Plan, siding with Pruitt and twenty-eight other state attorneys general (and dozens of industry lawyers). The Clean Power Plan, championed by Obama, requires states to cut greenhouse-gas emissions from electric power plants—the largest source of such emissions. Pruitt and other opponents argued that the law was based on an overly expansive reading of the Clean Air Act. As the E.P.A. administrator, Pruitt has promised to repeal it.

In general, though, Pruitt’s track record in suing the E.P.A., which he did fourteen times, was spotty. When the agency rejected Oklahoma’s plan for reducing emissions of sulfur dioxide, a component of smog, because it wasn’t stringent enough, Pruitt sued, contending that the E.P.A. had usurped Oklahoma’s authority. An appellate court ruled against him, and the Supreme Court declined to hear the case. Half of the legal actions that Pruitt joined against the E.P.A. have been either dismissed on jurisdictional grounds or declined on substantive ones. Several of the lawsuits are ongoing. (He has recused himself from lawsuits against the agency in which Oklahoma is involved. Two of them are named “Oklahoma ex rel. Pruitt v. E.P.A.”)

Pruitt knew that the odds were against him: courts generally defer to federal agencies and their expertise. But even legal defeats could serve his political ambitions. David Blatt, the head of the Oklahoma Policy Institute, said, “In Oklahoma from 2008 to 2016, the antipathy toward the



Obama Administration was so great here that just by saying you were standing up to the Administration it was going to be a victory.”

In suing the E.P.A., Pruitt and other state attorneys general usually partnered with industry litigants. Many of the corporations involved—such as Murray Energy and Southern Company—had donated to his campaigns or to affiliated super *pacs*. The co-chair of Pruitt’s 2014 reelection campaign was Harold Hamm, the billionaire C.E.O. of the oil-and-natural-gas company Continental Resources.

In Oklahoma, Pruitt’s obeisance to the energy industry was sometimes startling. Four years ago, Eric Lipton, of the *Times*, revealed that a letter Pruitt once sent to E.P.A. regulators, complaining that they had overestimated how much pollution new oil wells were producing in Oklahoma, had been copied, nearly word for word, from a draft supplied by Devon Energy. William F. Whitsitt, who then directed government relations at Devon, praised the letter as “outstanding.”

When Pruitt came to the E.P.A., he broke with agency practice by refusing to release his schedule in advance or his calendar of meetings after the fact. In response to scores of lawsuits brought by environmental and government-transparency groups, he gave in—a bit. He began posting a calendar online, but it generally did not divulge the subjects of his meetings or the names of attendees. Even this partial view of his schedule, however, revealed how radically Pruitt had tilted in a business-oriented direction. The administrator’s traditional array of meetings with environmental or public-health groups had been almost entirely replaced by speeches to corporate groups, such as the Louisiana Chemical Association, and private meetings with representatives of fossil-fuel companies and other regulated concerns. (Pruitt has withheld the text of these speeches.)

In private meetings, Pruitt had many opportunities to hear about how coal-ash regulations were irking some energy companies. On March 9, 2017, Pruitt met with Lynn Good, the C.E.O. of Duke Energy, at a Hilton hotel in Houston, to talk about “Duke Energy’s policy priorities.” In April, he had lunch at Equinox, a Washington restaurant, with executives from Alabama Power. In May, a month after Pruitt announced that the agency would reconsider the 2015 Effluent Limitations Guidelines rule, he had a call with Good to discuss coal ash. Immediately afterward, he met with another coal executive, and then with the Congressional Coal Caucus. Pruitt’s decision to “reconsider” the 2014 rule soon followed.

William Reilly, the E.P.A. administrator under President George H. W. Bush, told me, “I had a good reputation with industry—I was on the board of DuPont after E.P.A. But you’re supposed to meet with *everybody*. And to not know what environmentalists are signalling as problems—that’s unwise. Industry is unlikely to be the source of information about developing environmental problems.”

Elizabeth Southerland, the E.P.A. official who helped write the Effluent Limitations Guidelines rule, tried to talk to Pruitt and his political staff about her thinking. She found the experience bewildering. By the time she and her team briefed Pruitt, he had already put out a press release deriding the regulation as “costly.” Still, she had hope. Career E.P.A. employees tend to be data-oriented types with a sometimes naïve belief in the persuasive powers of science. “He did not tell

us what he was hearing from industry,” Southerland said. “He did not debate with us, or indicate any leaning one way or another. He just sat there.” She went on, “In the past, administrators would say, ‘I’m hearing from this industry this or that,’ and then you could rebut it or say, ‘I have to get back to you.’ But we could never really get a feel in all this briefing process for *why* he must not be believing what we were saying.”

It’s not surprising that Trump’s E.P.A. has targeted Obama-era initiatives and rules with the word “coal” in them. But some Pruitt rollbacks don’t seem to fit into any broader conservative agenda: they don’t grant significantly more discretion to the states, or seem likely to create many jobs. They seem like favors to specific industries or companies.

In November, Pruitt proposed the repeal of an Obama-era rule that imposed Clean Air Act emissions standards on glider vehicles—heavy-duty trucks that pair new cabs and chassis with older, dirtier engines. Gliders are slightly cheaper than all-new trucks, in part because they aren’t equipped with modern pollution controls. They make up only five per cent of the heavy-duty-truck fleet, but they emit a disproportionate amount of dangerous pollution. Steve Silverman, a former E.P.A. attorney, who retired in January, worked on the glider rule. “We’re not talking only about greenhouse gases,” he said. “These trucks put out diesel particulate matter, a human-lung carcinogen.” In 2016, an agency analysis concluded that gliders produce almost three hundred thousand tons of nitrogen-oxide pollution a year, along with nearly eight thousand tons of diesel-particulate pollution. Agency scientists estimate that a single year of glider pollution causes as many as sixteen hundred premature deaths.

At a public hearing in December, environmental and public-health groups such as the American Lung Association sent representatives to speak for keeping the rule. That was expected. But so did Volvo Group North America, which produces both Volvo and Mack trucks. Susan Alt, Volvo North America’s vice-president of public affairs, testified that the proposed repeal “makes a mockery of the massive investments we’ve made to develop low-emission-compliant technology.” The American Trucking Association also testified against a repeal. Bob Nuss, whom the association named the 2017 Truck Dealer of the Year, flew at his own expense from Minnesota to Washington, D.C., to attend the hearing. Nuss said, “I told them, ‘Maybe it’s only five per cent of the trucks, but how would we all feel if five per cent of the trucks didn’t have to stop for a school bus or obey the speed limit?’ Sneaking around, avoiding emissions compliance, filling the air with soot—it’s just not right.”

The strongest support for rescinding the rule comes from the largest producer of gliders, Fitzgerald. Last year, Fitzgerald, which is based in Tennessee, hosted a campaign event for Trump. In May, Pruitt met with the company’s founder and C.E.O., Tommy Fitzgerald. Two months later, Fitzgerald and two glider dealers wrote a letter to Pruitt contending that the agency lacked the authority to regulate gliders under the Clean Air Act, because “the engine, transmission, and typically the rear axle” are “not new.”

Pruitt soon announced that the E.P.A. would reconsider the rule, and precisely echoed Fitzgerald’s claim that gliders fell into a regulatory gray area because they contained “new and used” components. Silverman, the former E.P.A. attorney, said that this is “just wrong.” In the

Clean Air Act, Congress defined a “new motor vehicle” as one for which the title “has never been transferred to an ultimate purchaser.” Moreover, Silverman said, “the E.P.A. has explicit authority to regulate emissions from rebuilt diesel engines.”

Pruitt’s rollbacks have already been contested in court. The Trump Administration’s favored shortcut—suspending the enforcement of a rule while it’s being “reconsidered”—is proving vulnerable to challenges. In June, 2016, Gina McCarthy, Obama’s second E.P.A. administrator, issued a rule, under the Clean Air Act, requiring energy companies to fix any leaks—or, in the poetic regulatory language, “fugitive emissions”—of methane, a greenhouse gas. An industry alliance petitioned for reconsideration. On June 5, 2017, two days after companies were supposed to begin monitoring methane leaks, Pruitt announced that the E.P.A. would be reconsidering aspects of the rule, and would stay enforcement for ninety days. On June 16th, the agency announced that it would extend that stay for two years, and “look broadly at the entire 2016 rule.” Six environmental groups filed suit, arguing that all the industry groups’ complaints “*actually were* raised (and extensively deliberated) during the comment period.”

It’s not uncommon for a new President’s Administration to try to freeze enforcement of rules put in place by an outgoing one. But such delays have usually lasted only a month or so, according to Rena Steinzor, a University of Maryland law professor who studies the practice. Pruitt’s delays are uncommonly long, she said, and he generally doesn’t give “credible reasons why changes are necessary.”

Federal agencies are supposed to abide by the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946, to insure that the work informing new regulations is transparent, reasoned, and not overly politicized. Bethany Davis Noll, an environmental lawyer at the N.Y.U. Institute for Policy Integrity, said, “It’s also so you don’t have agencies turning on a dime in response to an election.” Courts hold agencies to the “arbitrary and capricious” standard: to rescind a regulation, they must demonstrate sound reasoning tied to a factual record.

William Buzbee, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, pointed out that the 1946 law protects businesses, too: “Oftentimes, industries have invested in new technology and practices already, figuring out ways to do well under a new regime. So unsettling business expectations is a huge cost. *One* company might like it, but that doesn’t mean it’s good for American business or the economy over all.”

In July, the Court of Appeals for the Washington, D.C., Circuit ordered the E.P.A. to lift its stay on the methane rule. An agency can reconsider regulations, the court said, but must enforce them while doing so.

The following month, Pruitt backed off a decision to stay a 2015 regulation on ozone, after sixteen states sued the agency. Court challenges brought by environmental groups or states are pending on several other stays, and seventeen states have filed suits over his intention to rescind the Clean Power Plan. It seems likely that Pruitt’s E.P.A. will lose at least some of these cases. But, even if Pruitt must reinstate several rules, he’ll have rewarded certain key industries—and Trump constituents—by allowing them to postpone installing potentially costly new technologies, and to keep polluting in the meantime.

A willingness to fight in court also allows Pruitt to project decisive vigor, a quality that he associates with the President. In an October interview with the Daily Signal, a Web site of the Heritage Foundation, Pruitt said that Trump was “full of action,” adding, “He wants results. That’s what the American people want. . . . That’s what he’s done his whole life. I seek every day, and I mean this sincerely, to bless him. I want to bless him and the decisions he’s making.”

Pruitt may parrot Trump’s views, but he has a far more polished manner. In public appearances, he’s well spoken and unflaggingly polite. When conservative journalists prod him to snipe at the E.P.A.’s “lifelong bureaucrats,” he chuckles and declines the bait. In an interview with a Fort Worth radio station, Pruitt described the E.P.A.’s career employees as “hardworking folks” who, in the Obama years, had lost “their mission.” He told the Daily Signal that he was talking to career employees about “the rule of law and process and federalism,” but emphasized that he was listening to them, too.

As administrator, Pruitt has become adept at presenting his views with bland jargon. He defends his frequent meetings with industry representatives as time spent with “stakeholders who care about outcomes.” (And he describes them as “farmers and ranchers,” not as “fossil-fuel lobbyists.”) He touts “fuel diversity,” explaining, “It’s not the job of the E.P.A. to say to the utility company in any state of the country, ‘You should choose renewables over natural gas or coal.’ . . . We need more choices, not less.” And Pruitt has adopted a favored term of the anti-regulatory right, “coöperative federalism”: putting more of the onus for environmental rule-making and enforcement on states.

Many E.P.A. employees told me that they’d been engaging in coöperative federalism for years. John O’Grady, the president of the union that represents agency workers, said, “We’re *partners* with states, tribes, municipalities. We provide them with enforcement and funding, and we sometimes act like the gorilla in the closet when needed—when a state is negotiating with resistant parties.” But, he added, “most of the states are operating under budget constraints—they *can’t* do it on their own.” William Ruckelshaus, the former E.P.A. administrator, doubts that states could assume much more responsibility for environmental protection. “That’s where E.P.A. came from in the first place,” he said. “I started out in environmental government, in Indiana, and we had a few very weak statutes. But states were competing for industry. Governor Wallace took out ads in the Indianapolis paper, saying, basically, ‘Come on down to Alabama—we don’t care *what* you put in the water!’ ” Ruckelshaus continued, “The state programs are more powerful now, because they have federal backup. You don’t want to dismantle this—we’ll be back where we started, with a race to the bottom.”

Pruitt’s performance has been so skillfully calibrated that the rumors he might be named Attorney General—even if he’s stoked them himself—seem plausible. It’s also been said that he might return to Oklahoma to run for Jim Inhofe’s Senate seat in 2020. (Inhofe, a flamboyant climate-change denier who once brandished a snowball on the Senate floor to demonstrate that the planet couldn’t possibly be getting warmer, is eighty-three.) Pruitt’s relentless promotion of the American fossil-fuel industry—he recently travelled to Morocco to promote exports of liquefied natural gas—might well help him raise money for a Senate bid, or for a Presidential run in 2024.

For all his dad-next-door affability, Pruitt has been more secretive and security-conscious than previous administrators, in ways that have left career staffers feeling alienated. He has a round-the-clock security detail—the first E.P.A. administrator to have one. He has installed a soundproof phone booth in his office, at a cost of forty-three thousand dollars. Longtime employees told me that it has become extremely difficult to enter the administrator’s office. In December, *The Hill* reported that the E.P.A. had paid three thousand dollars to a security firm to “sweep for covert/illegal surveillance devices.” Pruitt told Bloomberg News that these measures had been dictated by threats against him and his family. He recently came under criticism for flying first class; the Administration defended him by citing “extremely rude” comments from economy-class passengers, including an individual at the Atlanta airport who had yelled, “Scott Pruitt, you’re fucking up the environment!”

Former and current E.P.A. employees told me that the tightened security has contributed to a tense atmosphere. One employee said that she’d been sharply reprimanded after a security camera caught her in a trivial act of rebellion—turning around a poster that touted Pruitt’s “Back to Basics” campaign. She had been offended by the poster’s implication that “we hadn’t been fulfilling the agency’s mission all these years.”

On March 28, 2017, when Trump came to E.P.A. headquarters to announce that his Administration would overturn Obama-era regulations on greenhouse-gas emissions, the staff received an e-mail with the subject line “Our Big Day Today.” To many staffers, it sounded like jeering. Michael Cox, an E.P.A. climate-change adviser, quit four days later, after writing a letter to Pruitt: “Who is ‘our’ referring to? Was it the many E.P.A. career staff that worked for years developing the work that was rescinded or revoked?”

It later emerged that Cox was one of dozens of E.P.A. employees being monitored by Allan Blutstein, a lawyer for Definers Public Affairs, an opposition-research firm with conservative clients. Blutstein submitted Freedom of Information Act requests for all of Cox’s work correspondence. (*Mother Jones* reported that the E.P.A. had also contracted with Definers to perform “media monitoring” services. The agency subsequently cancelled the contract, which was worth a hundred and twenty thousand dollars.) Cox said of Definers’ work, “It seemed kind of petty to go after a low-level bureaucrat like me.”

Christine Todd Whitman, the Republican former governor of New Jersey, served as E.P.A. administrator from 2001 to 2003, under George W. Bush. “The morale at the agency now is not good,” she told me. “The private telephone booth? There’s a secure facility elsewhere in the building already. This conveys the message ‘I’m talking all the time about things you can’t know about.’ It’s a collaborative agency—you need to interact with career staff. Are there tree huggers at the agency who didn’t vote for Trump? Uh, yes. I can tell you, there were a whole lot who didn’t vote for George W. Bush. But, as long as they believed you wanted to protect human health and the environment, they were with you, even if you wanted to go about it a different way.”

A former senior legal staffer told me, “It’s been such a big hit on morale, the politicals not asking us questions—‘What’s it going to mean if this regulation doesn’t go into effect? We want your

experience to be part of the decision.’ For career staff, it’s a dilemma. If you haven’t been asked, and you speak up anyway—‘You’re going to lose in court if you try this,’ ‘The public is going to react negatively’—that can easily translate into ‘Don’t talk to this person anymore.’ ”

Others spoke about senior managers telling subordinates that, in order to protect grants and other programs, they should expunge such words as “climate change” from the paper trail. And staffers found that the word “sustainability” aroused suspicion among Trump appointees. A senior staffer said, “ ‘Climate’ doesn’t surprise me, but ‘sustainability’? That’s a term that’s used broadly, across countries, industries, communities.” The staffer noted, “I worked on the same issues under the Bush Administration. There was a lot more emphasis on industry-government partnerships, but everybody got it on sustainability.”

Soon after Trump took office, environmentalists started worrying that climate-change information would be purged from government Web sites. A group of researchers formed the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative, in part to track any such alterations. So far, these haven’t been comprehensive. If you type “E.P.A.” and “climate change” into Google, you can still find a lot of valid information, but many blunt statements about global warming (“The science is clear—greenhouse-gas emissions from all sources must decrease”) have been deleted. An E.P.A. program called Climate Ready Water Utilities has been renamed Creating Resilient Water Utilities.

Pruitt clearly ordered many of these language changes. On April 28th, the day before the People’s Climate March in Washington, D.C., anyone searching E.P.A. pages for information about climate change found the message “This page is being updated.” A search for the Clean Power Plan redirected users to a page titled “Complying with President Trump’s Executive Order on Energy Independence.” An e-mail thread that was subsequently released, in response to a *foia* request by the Environmental Defense Fund, shows that Pruitt requested these changes. (On April 5th, a senior adviser to Pruitt, Lincoln Ferguson, had e-mailed another adviser, “How close are we to launching this on the website? The Administrator would like it to go up ASAP.”)

Renée Dagseth, who worked on the program that informed communities about toxic leaks, left the E.P.A. last summer. “Senior career management seems to be frozen out of decision-making,” she said. “We’re trying to do the work while waiting for the floor to drop out. And to be led by people who have made it really clear that they don’t have respect for that mission is demoralizing. And I think intentionally so. The plan for ‘red’ and ‘blue’ teams to debate climate change? This isn’t some game show! We’re talking about the survival of the planet.”

Another senior staffer noted, “People have different approaches: Do you ride it out? Wait till you have some really hard evidence on something very political? Most people have a red line. You have to have that line at the front of your mind now. You have to be thinking, What am I going to do? Put it in writing? Go to my manager? Walk away, lose my job?”

Others talked about the unease of sitting at their desks with less and less to do. In August, a report by the nonpartisan Environmental Integrity Project showed that Trump’s E.P.A. was pursuing significantly fewer enforcement cases against companies for violating pollution laws. John O’Grady, the union president, told me, “Enforcement action keeps people honest. It’s like

cops on the highway—they can't stop everybody who's speeding, but if you know they stop some people you slow down. Also, if they're not out there doing inspections, we're not generating data about industries. I don't think this Administration would get rid of E.P.A.—there would be too much of an outcry—but they could muzzle it enough that it will be there but *not* there.”

Other E.P.A. employees said they were upset that Pruitt has suspended a long-standing practice at the agency: settling deadline lawsuits. The statutes undergirding E.P.A. policies—the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Toxic Substances Control Act—typically set out time frames for making rules or taking action. The agency often doesn't meet these deadlines, because it tends to move painstakingly and solicits commentary from industries, environmentalists, and the general public. Anyone with a stake in the matter can sue to enforce the deadline. The agency has settled hundreds of such cases, because, as Jayni Hein, a professor of administrative law at the N.Y.U. Institute for Policy Integrity, told me, “they know they'd likely lose if it went to court.” Settlements forced the endlessly deliberated coal-ash rules to be enacted.

In the past few years, conservative critics of regulation have targeted what they call “sue-and-settle.” A 2013 Chamber of Commerce report argues that the practice produces “rulemaking in secret” and “private agreements,” circumvents Congress, and costs taxpayers dearly in legal fees. That year, at a meeting of *alec*, in Oklahoma City, Pruitt addressed a workshop sponsored by Koch Industries. The subject of his speech, according to an e-mail eventually released by the Oklahoma attorney general's office, was “state primacy in oil and gas regulation and the EPA's sue & settle modus operandi.”

In October, Pruitt issued an agency directive ending the practice, saying that past settlements “appeared to be the result of collusion with outside groups.” He added, “E.P.A. will not resolve litigation through backroom deals with any type of special-interest group.” Given Pruitt's frequent private meetings with industry representatives, this struck many E.P.A. staffers as hypocritical.

Fifty-seven former E.P.A. attorneys wrote a letter of protest, saying that Pruitt had provided “no evidence to substantiate” the claim that ending sue-and-settle would save money. The agency would simply end up in court more, with all the attendant expenses.

Nicole Cantello, an attorney in the E.P.A.'s Chicago office, who spoke to me as a representative of the union, said, “He calls the practice ‘collusion’! You can imagine what that means for career E.P.A. lawyers who have a code of ethics. They would view that statement as incredibly insulting.”

The one environmental problem that Pruitt has consistently pledged to approach *more* aggressively is “revitalizing contaminated land.” The Superfund program is the favorite child—the Ivanka—of the Trump Administration's E.P.A. Pruitt has promised to restore the program to “its rightful place at the center of the agency's mission.” In a recent interview with Fox Business, Pruitt couched this shift in moral terms: “The agency the last several years has used regulatory power to weaponize against certain sectors of our economy, as opposed to . . . cleaning up a Superfund site in St. Louis.”

Pruitt has complained that cleanups can drag on for years, even decades, and he is right. Superfund has been around since 1980, and though nearly four hundred hazardous-waste sites have been cleaned up, many have languished, and new sites are designated every year. Currently, more than thirteen hundred sites are on the list. In 1995, Congress let lapse the tax on chemical and petroleum companies which funnelled money into Superfund, and now the E.P.A. often must sue companies to pay for the removal of the toxic waste they have left behind. But many sites are “orphaned”—fouled by parties that have long been bankrupt or can’t be identified.

The sites can present nightmarish challenges. At the West Lake Landfill complex, in a Missouri suburb of St. Louis, a “smoldering event” has been burning for years under a landfill. The fire is adjacent to another landfill, which contains radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project. Dawn Chapman, a local resident, who co-founded a group called Just Moms to raise awareness of the site, told me, “The smell is unbearable. Some days, parts of the ground collapse and you will see smoke and steam coming out.” West Lake has been a Superfund site since 1990, but remediation has been delayed by decades of scientific assessment and internal agency debate.

In May, Pruitt created a Superfund task force to promote “expeditious remediation” and the “revitalization of properties across the country.” He named Albert (Kell) Kelly, the former chairman of the Oklahoma-based SpiritBank, to head it. In July, the task force issued a report, but did not release minutes or reference materials—the persnickety documentation that usually accompanies government reports. Jeff Ruch, the head of an organization called Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, made a *foia* request for documentation of the task force’s deliberations, and was told that none had been found. “They’re asking us to believe the report was an immaculate conception,” he said.

The report barely mentions public health, instead stressing the “redevelopment” of sites. Although redevelopment has always been seen as an ancillary benefit of remediating toxic-waste sites, human health and environmental protection were the original priorities. Justin Pidot, a law professor at the University of Denver, who formerly represented the E.P.A. at the Department of Justice, said, “If you put too much emphasis on redevelopment, you risk focussing not on the sites that are the most dangerous but the ones that some developer can use most easily.” Pidot noted that the report supported “monitored natural attenuation”—seeing if pollution dissipates on its own—and giving companies “technical impracticability waivers.” He said, “‘Impracticability’ is a pretty squishy word—it’s not ‘feasibility.’ If a responsible party says, ‘Yes, we *could* remove that toxic waste, but it’s going to be expensive,’ is that ‘impracticable’?”

Lee Ann Smith, a community activist who lives near a Superfund site in Asheville, North Carolina, said, “Our concern is some of these companies will get a really good deal on these toxic-waste sites, and, instead of removing the waste, they’ll cap it in place with concrete and put a shopping center or a school on it, and you’ll still have all those toxins there—and the potential to poison people.”

Smith was among a dozen Superfund-site activists who met with Kelly in late January. Pruitt stopped in to reassure everyone that human health, not redevelopment, remained Superfund’s top priority. If so, Kelly was an odd choice for the program. He has no background in environmental



science, and his record as a banker is hardly unblemished. In July, the F.D.I.C. fined him a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars and banned him from banking, citing his “unfitness to serve.” (The F.D.I.C. did not detail specific charges.) William Black, a law professor at the University of Kansas whose expertise is banking law, told me that such a ban is unusual. In 2009, SpiritBank received thirty million dollars from the Troubled Asset Relief Program; it has paid back only a fraction of that amount. A loan from SpiritBank allowed Pruitt to buy the RedHawks baseball team. (The E.P.A. declined to make Kelly available for an interview. But Pruitt’s chief of staff, Ryan Jackson, provided me with a statement asserting that Kelly never took “any action which threatened the bank.”)

Pruitt and Kelly have treated the Superfund initiative like an election campaign, shaking hands with local activists and making promises. Some sites have obviously been chosen, in part, to shore up Trump’s appeal in red states. Dawn Chapman and her Just Moms co-founder, Karen Nickel, were impressed when Kelly visited Missouri in June and had a forty-five-minute listening session with residents. He gave them his cell-phone number. In February, the E.P.A. announced that the Missouri site would be partly excavated, at a cost to the liable companies of two hundred and thirty-six million dollars. Chapman was grateful to Pruitt, though she realized that other environmentalists might find this baffling. “If your kid was in the middle of the street and a car was barreling at him, you wouldn’t care who jumped out and saved him,” she said. “That’s where we are at this point. Scott Pruitt was the one to step out, grab the kid, and jump to the other side of the road.”

Pruitt has visited East Chicago, Indiana, and also the San Jacinto waste pits, outside Houston—dumping grounds for dioxins and other toxic chemicals. The pits were declared a Superfund site in 2008; in 2011, the E.P.A. put a temporary cap over the waste. But in August the cap leaked during Hurricane Harvey, and the agency soon discovered elevated dioxin levels in an adjacent river. Pruitt visited the site in September and met with Jackie Young, a local environmental activist. Young said of Pruitt, “He had a firm handshake, looked me in the eye, and said he’d have a decision on how they were going to proceed by the time Oklahoma beats Texas in football, which we had a laugh about.” Three days before the Sooners-Longhorns game, the E.P.A. came out with an ambitious plan to remove the waste. (The Sooners won.) Young recalls Pruitt saying, “This is something tangible we can do for the American people.”

It’s important to clean up “tangible” sludge in Texas, Missouri, and elsewhere. But many E.P.A. staffers believe that Pruitt is giving priority to efforts that can be the basis for a before-and-after commercial, while ignoring bigger ecological threats. Unlike a Superfund site, global warming can’t be fixed before 2020.

Lois Gibbs is sometimes called the “mother of the Superfund.” As a young housewife living in upstate New York, in the seventies, she helped draw attention to a toxic-waste dump in her neighborhood, Love Canal. Gibbs, who founded an organization called the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, has met with Kelly several times. She was discomfited by the way he and his team were running Superfund “like it’s their own small business—not part of an agency with other staffers.”

In December, the E.P.A. named twenty-one sites that would get “immediate and intense attention.” Gibbs worried that only a few are orphaned sites, which are much harder to clean up. And what about the thirteen hundred or so sites that hadn’t grabbed Pruitt’s attention? Gibbs urged Kelly to support a Senate bill, introduced by Cory Booker, the New Jersey Democrat, that would restore the industry tax that once amassed money for Superfund. Kelly and Pruitt have not voiced any support for it.

At the same time that Pruitt has been pledging to clean up some Superfund sites, he has been dismantling important Superfund regulations. In December, he announced that he would eliminate a 2016 rule requiring hard-rock-mining operations, such as gold, silver, and lead mines, to provide evidence that they had the financial resources to clean up any toxic messes that they created. The rule came about after environmental groups sued the E.P.A. over “heap-leach” mining, in which cyanide is used to extract gold from open pits. Multiple companies using this method had caused vast contaminations, then declared bankruptcy or sheltered assets. The 1980 Superfund law states that polluters, not taxpayers, must pay for remediation of disaster sites.

In late January, when Lois Gibbs spoke with Pruitt at the meeting with Superfund activists, she asked him what he’d do if money for cleanups ran short. He told her he’d find the funds, but didn’t explain how. In an e-mail to me, she recalled, “I asked if he was opposed to the polluter-pays-fees tax, and he said he would never turn down more money—but didn’t come out and say he supported it. Doublespeak.”

In February, Pruitt visited a silver-and-gold mine in Nevada, where he discussed the repeal of the financial-assurance law, telling miners that the E.P.A. would no longer be “weaponized” against them. In a statement, he said that the 2016 rule imposed “an undue burden on this important sector of the American economy.” After one heap-leach calamity, in which toxic runoff from a gold mine in Colorado trashed the surrounding watershed and farmland, a local resident, Ignacio Rodriguez, told a reporter, “They got the gold and we got the shaft.”

Elizabeth Southerland, the former E.P.A. official, said, “Pruitt’s repeal of rules, failure to enforce rules, and weakening of rules will result in him creating many *new* Superfund sites.”

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, there is an E.P.A. lab stocked with new-model cars and trucks. Since 1971, scientists at the lab have been testing new vehicles to insure that updated emissions standards are achievable, and that manufacturers are meeting them. They put the vehicles on big metal rolls—treadmills for cars—and assess their engines and their fuel emissions. The lab has developed tests that simulate myriad driving conditions, from open highway to teeth-clenching city traffic. In one testing area, employees can raise the temperature to ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit and crank up the car’s A.C., or lower the temperature to twenty degrees, simulating a frosty morning in New Hampshire.

John German, an engineer who has worked for Chrysler and Toyota as well as at the E.P.A. lab, and who is now a senior fellow at a nonprofit called the International Council on Clean Transportation, told me, “The E.P.A. lab really is the gold standard internationally.” In recent years, lab engineers helped prove that Volkswagen had rigged some of its diesel cars so that emissions controls kicked in only under laboratory conditions, and were emitting as much as

forty times more nitrogen oxide in real-world driving. In 2017, the company was ordered to pay \$2.8 billion in criminal fines.

In the early seventies, the E.P.A., operating under the Clean Air Act, began requiring car manufacturers to sharply reduce emissions. Some regulations were designed to be “technology forcing”: high-efficiency vehicles did not yet exist, but regulators expected the auto industry to get creative under pressure. Technology forcing was controversial, but it worked. Car manufacturers developed the catalytic converter (to transform harmful hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides into water and carbon dioxide) and electronic fuel injection (to improve fuel efficiency and produce cleaner exhaust).

There were other benefits down the line. Catalytic converters hastened the removal of lead from gasoline, because lead made the converters malfunction. Fuel injection, which relied on electronic sensors, expedited the computerization of cars, which made them cleaner and more efficient. Joseph Somers, a retired engineer who worked at the Ann Arbor lab for four decades, told me that, because of these innovations, “about five hundred current-model-year vehicles emit what a single 1970 model did.”

In 1974, a top Chrysler engineer warned a Senate committee that new emissions standards would essentially “outlaw” station wagons and large sedans. But the car companies adapted, and were happy when their large sedans got better as well as cleaner. “Things that were controversial, once they worked, were widely accepted,” Somers said.

The auto industry came to rely on E.P.A. protocols. The lab, which designed its own technologies and components to help reduce emissions, now holds sixty patents. Gay MacGregor, until recently a senior policy adviser at the lab, said, “Because the regs are based on data and research, and the people in the industry are also engineers and scientists, you can come to an agreement on data a lot of the time.”

John German told me that the E.P.A. devised a way to make cost assessments that were more accurate and transparent. The lab began consulting with specialists who can “take a car apart, right down to the screws,” and tabulate the exact price of making a particular change. Now, German said, “it’s hard for the manufacturers to argue about the costs.”

The lab also assesses the effects of multiple innovations. German said, “If you take a single technology and a single vehicle, it’s pretty easy to figure out what the efficiency is, but what if you combine technologies? This one gets you three per cent, this one five. If you put ’em together, do you get eight, or are there overlaps in benefits, so you only get six?” At a rally outside the lab in May, Margo Oge, who headed the E.P.A.’s office of transportation and air quality from 1994 to 2012, said that the facility “has done more to reduce emissions and air pollution than any other” lab in the country.

In the Trump Administration’s original budget blueprint, over-all E.P.A. funding was to be cut by thirty-one per cent. The budget of the division that houses the Ann Arbor lab was to be reduced from a hundred and eight million dollars to seventy-six million.

In July, the House Appropriations Committee settled on a much smaller over-all cut for the agency—6.5 per cent. But, according to an analysis by the Environmental Protection Network, a group of E.P.A. alumni who monitor changes under Pruitt, the agency’s budget, adjusted for inflation, was already lower than it had been since 1986, so even the House proposal represents an alarming reduction. Last May, Representative Debbie Dingell, a Michigan Democrat, said of the lab, “This is a national treasure, and we will not let them destroy it.” Gay MacGregor retired so that she could organize a group to defend it. She felt that, even if funding were restored, the lab’s work on reducing greenhouse-gas emissions remained vulnerable under Pruitt’s leadership.

MacGregor’s fear was soon realized. In August, Pruitt announced that the E.P.A. would be “reopening” the question of whether the latest clean-car standards—which mandate that auto manufacturers achieve an average fuel efficiency of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025—are feasible. Those standards, established under the Obama Administration, were aimed at cutting greenhouse-gas emissions and reducing oil dependence. The rule required the agency to conduct a midterm evaluation of how things were going; it did so in 2016, and determined that the standards remained within reach.

That November, Gina McCarthy, the E.P.A. administrator at the time, opened up a monthlong public comment period for the midterm evaluation. When Pruitt took over, multiple automobile trade associations complained that the comment period had been rushed, and that the requirements were onerous. Pruitt announced a “robust review of emissions standards.”

McCarthy told me she remained confident that there was “literally nothing hasty” about the process. Indeed, the latest research had suggested that meeting the target would be cheaper than the E.P.A. had predicted. The agency’s goals did not even require the development of electric cars. In the meantime, the U.K. and France had announced that no diesel or gasoline vehicles would be sold there by 2040, India had promised to go electric by 2030, and China had created stringent new goals for the production of electric and hybrid vehicles. McCarthy said it was “heartbreaking” to watch Pruitt “undo so much” when “climate change is so clearly happening.”

One crisp evening in October, I went to a meeting of about a dozen current and former lab employees that Gay MacGregor was hosting at her Ann Arbor apartment. Everybody sat in a circle in her living room, drinking beers. People who still worked at the lab asked not to be named. In the past, they said, it had been easy to bring reporters to the lab. But it was difficult under Pruitt. (My request to visit the lab was declined.)

It was an odd evening, with these earnest government engineers and economists gathered in a kind of samizdat bunker. Most had known each other for years. Somebody mentioned the bushy sideburns they’d had when they joined the lab, in the seventies. Another person brought up the engineer Joseph Somers’s photographic memory.

“He remembers my first car,” one guy said.

“That brown Vega!” Somers said.

“See? *I* didn’t even remember that.”

Soon, though, the tone grew serious. Jim McCargar had come to the E.P.A. in 1983, and during his years at the agency he turned to climate science. As an undergrad at Harvard, McCargar had started out majoring in physics and astronomy, but while hitchhiking across the country one summer he'd got caught up in the environmental movement and switched to biology. Now, he said, a lot of young scientists coming out of school wanted to work on climate change. If the E.P.A. lost its edge in climate science, the young talent would go elsewhere. (The French President, Emmanuel Macron, recently awarded thirteen research grants to U.S.-based climate scientists, and invited them to relocate to France.) "I have a leaden feeling in my soul about what's happening," McCargar said. "We put a huge amount of work into analyzing this and creating these regulations."

Thousands and thousands of pages, somebody interjected. Ten years. Millions of dollars.

"And now we get this President in there who's saying, 'We're just going to look at it all *again*.' What for?"

Jane Armstrong, who had been the lab's director of compliance, working closely with auto manufacturers, said, "The best and the brightest come here. If you dumb down the agency, how do you keep recruiting the best?"

She and a few others remembered weathering the two years, during the Reagan Administration, when the agency was run by Anne Gorsuch, a conservative state legislator from Colorado (and the mother of the Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch). Those years were the only precedent to Pruitt's tenure. Gorsuch had cut enforcement, accommodated polluters, and antagonized career staff. She resigned after being held in contempt of Congress, for refusing to comply with a corruption investigation targeting a Superfund administrator.

William Ruckelshaus, whom Reagan had brought back to the agency after Gorsuch's departure, restored morale. He established transparency in decision-making, and he conveyed respect for career employees. In a speech, he declared, "There is no finer group of public servants in this country." The E.P.A.'s mission, he said, was "transcendent."

Somers said, "I've had about twelve people call me asking what was it like then—what should they do? My advice is 'Stay, if you can.' "

One of the engineers said that it might take a while to "rebuild capacity" after Pruitt. But it would be done. The public, he reminded everyone, "is expecting us to protect the planet." He said, "Pruitt is a temporary interloper. *We* are the real agency."