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Congress Asks Lobbyists Who Fought EPA How To Make It 'Great Again'

The coal and chemical industry reps will outnumber scientists at a Tuesday hearing.

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A coal lawyer, a chemical industry lobbyist and a libertarian scholar who recently accused the Environmental Protection Agency of “regulatory terrorism” will join a lone advocate for science as witnesses before a Tuesday congressional hearing titled “Making EPA Great Again.”

The four witnesses will “discuss how EPA can pursue environmental protection and protect public health by relying on sound science,” according to the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology.

The hearing marks the Science Committee’s first meeting since the Republican-controlled Congress convened and President Donald Trump took office. Since he became chairman of the committee in 2013, Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas) has pursued such an ideologically driven agenda, including what critics dubbed “witch hunts” meant to tarnish the credibility of scientists, that some now call it the “House (anti)science panel.” As a vocal skeptic of the widely accepted science behind manmade global warming, The Texas Tribune suggested Smith will be “invigorated by the new climate change-doubting presidential administration.”

Those invited to testify seem likely to echo the chairman’s views.

Jeffrey Holmstead, a partner at former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s law firm, Bracewell LLP, became a top lobbyist for coal and utility companies after he served as assistant EPA administrator under President George W. Bush. During his time there, the EPA weakened environmental rules and politically attacked scientists. The agency became “less independent than its predecessors and more closely tied to the White House’s ideology,” according to the educational nonprofit American Chemical Society.

Holmstead has fought tighter EPA restrictions on mercury emissions from power plants, celebrating victory when the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that the rules unfairly failed to

consider compliance costs for businesses. The electricity industry remains the largest source of carbon pollution in the country, producing 30 percent of total emissions, due to its dependence on dirty-burning coal and methane-leaking natural gas.

Kimberly White, senior director of chemical products at the American Chemistry Council, works for the country's largest chemical manufacturing trade association, which in 2013 fought the EPA in the Supreme Court to block new rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

That same year, the trade association sued California regulators to prevent the state from placing new restrictions on bisphenol A, or BPA, a potentially harmful chemical agent used to strengthen plastic bottles. The council wields tremendous lobbying influence, spending \$86.4 million on those efforts from 2006 through 2016, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics.

In eight pages of prewritten testimony for Tuesday's hearing, White accused the EPA of using irrelevant or out-of-date data and procedures when drafting new regulations.

Jason Johnston, a scholar at the Cato Institute — which was founded by billionaire oil and chemical mogul Charles Koch — last year equated President Barack Obama's plan to reduce carbon pollution from utilities with "regulatory terrorism." As far back as 2008, Johnston has railed against what he called "misguided regulation of greenhouse gas emissions" as a result of "climate change alarmism." That's a stance familiar to the fossil fuel industry. In one academic paper, he sought to poke holes in the scientific consensus on global warming by picking apart language used by researchers in what he called the "climate establishment."

The only would-be dissenter on a panel weighted heavily in favor of corporate polluters is Rush Holt Jr., chief executive of the nonprofit American Association for the Advancement of Science. Holt, a physicist, served as a Democratic congressman from New Jersey for 16 years.

He said he plans to urge the committee not to put too much weight on the scientific opinions of polluters. He also wants to walk lawmakers through methods for identifying "the best science."

"It's all too frequently that policies and regulations for some years now have been made with more emphasis on politically partisan ideology than on science," Holt told The Huffington Post on Monday. "Science has usually not had a big place at the table, if any place at the table."

"I guess I'd say it's about normal that they only have one serious scientist out of four witnesses," he added, referring to himself.

Smith, Holmstead and Johnston did not respond to requests for comment.

But Ben Schreiber, senior political strategist at the environmental nonprofit Friends of the Earth, was not pleased by the hearing line-up.

"This fits right into the Trump world of alternative facts," Schreiber told HuffPost. "You no longer have to be a scientist to comment on science. It's terrifying."

To the new Trump administration, a history of filing lawsuits against the EPA appears to be a sound qualification for shaping the agency. The president picked Scott Pruitt, the fossil fuel-

backed Oklahoma attorney general who has sued the EPA 14 times, to lead the agency. Trump also named Myron Ebell, a hawkish climate science denier, to oversee the EPA transition team. A once-fringe political figure, Ebell last week said that Trump was taking steps to eliminate the EPA altogether. In fact, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) has drafted a bill that aims to “completely abolish” the agency by the end of 2018, HuffPost reported last week.

At the very least, the news site Axios reported last month, the Trump team is considering major cuts to the EPA’s budget, including slashing hundreds of millions from grants to states and Native American tribes, climate programs, and environmental programs and management.