

The Washington Post

EPA chief criticizes Democratic governors, vows to concentrate on cleaning up vulnerable communities in a second Trump term

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September 3, 2020

The head of the Environmental Protection Agency argued Thursday that the Trump administration, which has aggressively rolled back environmental regulations in recent years, has done more to help vulnerable communities deal with pollution than the “misdirected policies” and “misused resources” of its predecessors.

Fifty years after President Richard M. Nixon created the EPA, its current leader, Andrew Wheeler, traveled to his presidential library in California on Thursday to outline a vision for the future that emphasizes economic development instead of tackling climate change.

Saying that “EPA has forgotten important parts of its mission,” Wheeler pledged that the agency would keep rolling back federal environmental and public health rules if President Trump is reelected and would focus on revitalizing minority communities. He suggested that strict enforcement of national air pollution rules had hampered struggling regions such as the industrial Midwest, citing a case of Benton Harbor, Mich., from 23 years ago.

“But unfortunately, in the past decade or so, some members of former administrations and progressives in Congress have elevated single-issue advocacy — in many cases focused just on climate change — to virtue-signal to foreign capitals, over the interests of communities within their own country,” Wheeler said, in a reference to the Paris climate accord, the international agreement to limit greenhouse gases, from which Trump plans to withdraw the United States in November.

The Obama administration led the effort to craft the global compact, making climate a top priority as it created regulations to reduce the country’s greenhouse gas emissions and encourage a shift to solar, wind and other cleaner sources of energy.

Speaking in front of a reflecting pool outside the Richard Nixon Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif., Wheeler said the EPA “needs to be more effective in addressing the environmental burdens that communities face. ... We must do this because the current lack of effectiveness has

contributed to some very perverse environmental outcomes and resulted in a lot of unintended consequences.”

But opponents say the White House has done little to help communities hit hardest by pollution and climate change, noting how the Trump administration has scaled back fuel efficiency standards for cars, reduced limits on emissions of methane and carbon dioxide from the fossil fuel industry and overhauled a bedrock law meant to give ordinary people a say in projects that threaten to pollute their neighborhoods.

“Every one of the actions they have taken, either by weakening or rolling back basic protections, has put environmental justice communities — front-line communities — in greater harm,” Mustafa Santiago Ali, a longtime EPA official who now works on environmental justice and climate issues for the National Wildlife Federation, said in an interview. “I have seen no actions that lead me to believe they have any interest in protecting those lives.”

Ali said Wheeler’s speech regarding the environment marks the latest example of the sharp contrast between Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. In recent weeks, Biden rolled out a \$2 trillion plan that treats climate change as a major threat to the nation. It would include eliminating carbon pollution from the electric sector by 2035, rejoining the Paris agreement, making huge investments in renewable energy and creating incentives for more energy-efficient cars, homes and commercial buildings.

Under a second Trump term, Wheeler said his agency could help revitalize industrial areas through investments in water systems and economic development. He cited the impact of a tax break program launched in 2018 and meant to spur private investment in economically distressed areas, saying, “It’s possible that Opportunity Zones are one of the biggest reasons Black unemployment in this country fell to its lowest recorded levels ever in 2019.”

Federal data, however, indicates that Black unemployment was higher one year after the first Opportunity Zone designations. It began falling in February 2019 before rising again in August 2019 and spiked this spring, when the coronavirus outbreak caused major U.S. job losses.

Mike Flynn, who worked at the EPA for nearly four decades and served as its acting deputy administrator before retiring in 2018, questioned Trump’s approach to the environment.

“The Trump administration has transformed EPA into an agency that’s failing to meet the fundamental mission of the agency, protecting public health and environment,” he said, adding that the staff “is really demoralized.”

The Trump administration has elevated programs such as Superfund, which allows the EPA to force polluters to clean up contaminated sites, or reimburse the federal government for those remediation costs, Flynn said. But he added, “You can’t pick and choose select issues that you’re going to focus on. Some of the fundamental, big issues, like climate, are not getting addressed.”

Still, some administration allies said Trump's EPA has given them a hearing in a way they didn't get under the previous administration. "We're treated as partners in the process," said Dale Moore, executive vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

While Wheeler said the administration values the input of local and community leaders and bemoaned the "more partisan political environment" that exists, he reserved a scathing critique Thursday for the Democratic governors of California and New York.

He highlighted the "many examples of poor environmental outcomes here in California, despite its environmental reputation," including the fact that raw sewage had been dumped in San Francisco "for many years" and rolling blackouts last month caused 50,000 gallons of raw sewage to be released into the Oakland Estuary when backup wastewater pumps failed. He blamed the blackouts on the state's policies that promote renewable energy and discriminate against natural gas plants.

Wheeler faulted New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) for blocking a natural gas pipeline in the Northeast.

Under Trump, the EPA has sought to reverse a slew of Obama-era policies, while continuing to implement programs mandated by Congress to spend tens of billions of dollars on water infrastructure upgrades. Lawmakers also have refused to go along with Trump's efforts to gut the agency's budget.

According to the [regulatory rollback tracker](#) by the Harvard Law School Environmental and Energy Law Program, the EPA has eliminated or repealed 19 existing rules, though most of these are being challenged in court. The changes affect a slew of policies, from which waterways the federal government must safeguard from pollution to the [sort of toxic waste power plants can discharge](#).

Wheeler noted that despite the administration's aggressive deregulation, air pollution in the United States fell 7 percent during the first three years of Trump's presidency. In 2019, he said, the agency was able to remove 27 toxic pollution sites from a national Superfund priority list after they were adequately cleaned up — the most in a single year since 2001.

"This is great news," he said. "And like most great news, you rarely read about it in the press."

The size of the EPA's [workforce has shrunk](#) during Trump's time in office, with many senior career officials opting to retire and criticizing the agency for its approach to enforcing the nation's environmental laws. According to the EPA, it is [8 percent smaller](#) than when Trump took office.

Asked what it would mean for the EPA to experience a second Trump term, Flynn replied, "The word that comes to mind, I think, would be 'devastating.' "

Peter Van Doren, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said one of the reasons that the EPA's work has become such contested territory is because the executive branch now wields outside influence when it comes to setting the nation's environmental standards.

“Because the underlying statutes have not been amended in more than a generation, environmental policy struggle takes place in the realm of administrative law and rulemaking,” he said, adding that “a lot” of those fights ultimately are decided in court.

The fact that states such as California are seeking to establish their own environmental standards is nothing new, Van Doren said. California did the same thing under President George W. Bush when it sought to establish stricter gas mileage requirements than the federal government.

Trump’s stewardship of the EPA has sparked criticism not just from environmental activists, but also from past leaders of the agency, including officials from Republican and Democratic administrations.

“I’m deeply concerned that five decades of environmental progress are at risk because of the attitude and approach of the current administration,” Christine Todd Whitman, a Republican who led the EPA under George W. Bush, told House lawmakers last year. “There is no doubt in my mind that under the current administration, the EPA is retreating from its historic mission to protect our environment and the health of the public from environmental hazards.”

In April 2019, seven past EPA chiefs wrote to lawmakers on Capitol Hill, offering Congress help with oversight of the agency. “We are united that there has never been a more important time for us to put aside our differences and advocate collectively for public health and the environment,” they wrote.

That letter was signed by William D. Ruckelshaus, a Republican who was tapped by Nixon to become the first administrator of the EPA. He also became an outspoken critic of the Trump administration’s approach until his death late last year at 87.