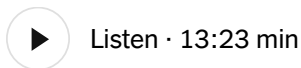


How the Trump Administration Ended Independent Science at the E.P.A.

The agency's prestigious research office spent decades doing scientific work insulated from political pressure. Now it's being dismantled.



By Lisa Friedman

Reporting from Washington

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For more than a half-century, a prestigious scientific arm of the federal government did groundbreaking research aimed at saving American lives. It studied fertility, asthma, wildfires, drinking water, climate change and myriad other health threats.

In just one year, it has been almost completely dismantled.

One scientist, a doctor and expert in lung health, has recently been reassigned to a finance office. Another, an epidemiologist, has been told she has a new job issuing permits to handle hazardous waste. A toxicologist researching so-called forever chemicals on the East Coast has been asked to move to Dallas and hasn't been told whether the research project will continue.

They are among more than 1,500 biologists, chemists and other experts at the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Research and Development who have been laid off, reassigned or pressured to retire. Today, only 124 researchers remain, and this month they must decide whether to remain employed they will abandon their work and move to different parts of the agency, or the country.

Those who stay will no longer serve in an independent unit designed to be free from political interference. Instead, they will be overseen by Trump appointees or in a new unit directly under the administrator, Lee Zeldin. An internal memo

in one office reviewed by The New York Times says its future research must “align with agency and administration priorities.”

Critics said the moves are part of the administration’s deregulatory fervor: Without independent science, they said, there can be few new limits on pollution or toxic chemicals.


The E.P.A. “just blew up a very well-performing organization that was making a difference, not only in the country but in the world,” said Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta, who led the research office under the first Trump administration.

Dismantling the research arm will significantly damage the agency and weaken the government’s ability to protect public health, according to more than two dozen current and former E.P.A. officials interviewed for this article. Some spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The science office operated the world’s only laboratory specializing in controlled human-exposure studies to determine the health effects of vehicle exhaust, wildfire smoke, ozone and other pollutants. That laboratory has been closed.

Scientists at the E.P.A. had created a way to search for fluorinated chemicals in water supplies, allowing them to detect a toxic man-made substance known as GenX in North Carolina’s Cape Fear River Basin. Many of those researchers have been reassigned.

And during the Biden administration, the office dived into the health consequences of climate change and discovered, among other things, that extreme heat could significantly worsen dementia. The Trump administration’s version of the E.P.A. no longer has researchers dedicated to climate science.

Brigit Hirsch, a spokeswoman for Mr. Zeldin, said that the Trump administration had improved science at the agency by putting scientists within specific programs, and has reassigned staff to “effectively use their skills to support E.P.A.’s mission.” For example, a group that responds to hazardous spills is able to advise on how to use artificial intelligence to improve disaster preparedness, she said, and moving approximately 200 staffers into the 

chemical office has enabled faster and more accurate evaluations. Hirsch also said the E.P.A. was still conducting human health studies and climate change research.

“Gold-standard science is happening like never before at the Trump E.P.A.,” she said, calling the notion that the agency has suffered scientific losses “an absurd narrative from people who know better and union rumor mills.”

Lee Zeldin, the E.P.A. administrator. Tierney L. Cross/The
New York Times

Critics said the Trump administration had removed the firewall between scientists and political appointees and said it could take years, if not decades, to rebuild that expertise. They also expressed concern that no other agency or university in the United States would be capable of replacing the breadth of

E.P.A.'s scientific branch.

“There’s really nobody anymore that will be looking out, with a comprehensive, independent perspective, at the quality of our environment and the quality of our health,” Dr. Orme-Zavaleta said.

Why critics targeted the office

While the Trump administration has rolled back science work across the government, the E.P.A.'s research was a particular target because its findings have often led to tighter air and water regulations, costing industries billions of dollars.

The Office of Research and Development was singled out in Project 2025, the conservative blueprint to shrink the federal government. The chapter on the E.P.A. called for constricting the agency’s “scientific enterprise” and called the scientific office “bloated, unaccountable, closed, outcome-driven, hostile to public and legislative input, and inclined to pursue political rather than purely scientific goals.”

Mandy Gunasekara, who served as the agency’s chief of staff during the first Trump administration and wrote the Project 2025 chapter, said in an interview that researchers in the office were biased against industry and toward environmentalist viewpoints. She said Mr. Zeldin’s changes were merely structural, adding, “I think characterizing this as getting rid of science is very misleading.”

Of particular concern to Republicans and industry was an office within the research group, the Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS, that evaluated the human health effects of exposure to toxic chemicals. Reports from that group were a first step in creating new regulations or standards.



Mandy Gunasekara, who wrote the Project 2025 chapter
on the E.P.A. Rogelio V. Solis/Associated Press

Critics of IRIS have said it has been misused to develop burdensome rules. Last year, executives from 80 industry trade groups accused it of being “out of step with global health agencies and regulators.”

Ms. Hirsch said the E.P.A. was evaluating the IRIS program “informed by the well-documented challenges it has faced.”

Also in the cross hairs: studying health trends.

The Environmental Protection Agency has increasingly embraced epidemiology, the study of health patterns within different populations, as a way to see if there are links between health problems and exposure to



pollutants. In one well-known work, the Harvard Six Cities study, scientists followed more than 8,000 adults in six cities with different concentrations of air pollution for up to 16 years.

That study, published in 1993, found that life expectancy in communities with higher air pollution was about two years shorter than in communities with less pollution. It led the E.P.A. to establish stricter air-quality standards.

It also led to industry attacks. During Mr. Trump's first term, his E.P.A. chiefs tried to rein in both IRIS and reliance on epidemiology. This term, the administration simply got rid of the larger research office that housed both branches of study.

For years, "They've been pushing on epidemiology but were never successful in eliminating it," said Douglas Dockery, a professor emeritus at Harvard University and a principal investigator on the Six Cities study. So instead, he said, "They're just saying, 'We're getting rid of all the science.'"

What's been lost

In January 2025, Bryan Hubbell was trying to understand whether extreme heat increases health risks for people with dementia.

Some colleagues were working with the oil and gas industry on ways to reduce leaks of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. Others were studying how to protect drinking water when climate-fueled wildfires burned plastic pipes that leach chemicals like benzene, a carcinogen.

When Mr. Trump took office, "It just stopped," Dr. Hubbell said. He took early retirement in June after 27 years.

"I really wanted to continue being able to do the work I was doing on climate, and especially on adaptation and trying to build a more resilient country," he said. "I knew I wasn't going to be able to."



Thomas J. Luben spent more than 18 years at a research office studying the effects of air pollution. Cornell Watson for The New York Times

Thomas J. Luben, an environmental epidemiologist, spent more than 18 years at the E.P.A.'s research office studying air pollution and how fine particulate matter and ozone affect pregnancies. During the Biden administration, he studied poor communities, which are disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change, in a field called environmental justice.

“The first week of the Trump administration, there was no more environmental justice, and no more climate change,” Dr. Luben said.



Dr. Luben and hundreds of other agency employees signed a letter last summer that accused the administration of “recklessly undermining the E.P.A. mission.” He was among a handful of senior scientists who were fired for it, a move he is currently appealing on First Amendment grounds.

Now Dr. Luben is at the University of Michigan, working on links between environmental exposures and Alzheimer’s. He wants to publish some of his E.P.A. research but worries because some colleagues are still at the agency, and listing them as co-authors “could get them fired,” he said.

Joel Hoffman, a research biologist, spent 19 years at the E.P.A. and eventually became branch chief at the Great Lakes Toxicology and Ecology Division in Duluth, Minn., widely recognized as the world’s leading freshwater research laboratory. Last year, he and his colleagues were working on ways to revitalize polluted neighborhoods and coastal habitats around the Great Lakes.

Within months of Mr. Trump’s return to the White House, funding for that and other research stalled. Meeting with scientists outside of E.P.A. buildings required special approval. New rules made it harder to publish research.

Then came what many federal employees call the Valentine’s Day Massacre, the dismissal of tens of thousands of workers as part of Mr. Trump’s downsizing of the government. Ultimately, Dr. Hoffman resigned.

“If you simply withhold funding and stall programs, you can functionally end the research without ever saying, ‘We’ve ended the research,’” he said.

Other teams that have been curtailed include: toxicologists studying the effect of chemical exposure on reproduction, neuroscientists researching how toxins affect brain cells, and a group that helped reduce the need for animal testing.

Scientists said the E.P.A. was now less likely to have information that might provide the basis to strengthen regulations of air and water pollution or toxic chemicals.

“If you have no data I guess you can just assume things are safe,” said Earl Gray, who spent more than 40 years at E.P.A. evaluating how toxic substances

damage the reproductive system.

Agency websites now downplay the link between human activities and climate change, despite overwhelming evidence that emissions from burning coal, oil and gas are the top driver of global warming. The agency stopped quantifying the benefit of saving a human life when setting emissions limits. Mr. Zeldin has also repealed or weakened more than two dozen regulations including on pollution from power plants, automobile tailpipes and oil and gas wells.

Lisa Friedman is a Times reporter who writes about how governments are addressing climate change and the effects of those policies on communities.

