

Dismantling EPA: What this means for Vermont

By DAVID BOND AND PHOEBE COHEN

Just over a week old, the Trump Administration is fast advancing a brave new world of environmental un-governance, one with dire consequence for the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the future our children will inhabit.

In his first hours in office, Trump initiated a hiring freeze at federal agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency, issued edicts muzzling the role of science in public policy, subjected the reporting of routine environmental data like air pollution levels to the editorial discretion of political appointees, and purged all mention of "climate change" from the official vocabulary of federal governance.

As faculty members at two New England colleges whose work has been supported by federal research grants and who see the next generation of scientists in our classrooms everyday, we are alarmed by this attack on science from the highest office in the land.

The new administration appears driven by an unprecedented hostility to science itself.

This is not a reasonable debate on the principles that should guide scientific investments and environmental safeguards — this is trying to blow up the library because you suspect it may contain a book you find distasteful.

Trump's toying with basic environmental protections reveals both how far we've come as a nation and how far we can fall.

There's a reason we now turn to textbooks to teach our students about the problems of "death-dealing" smog, careless pesticide use, substandard drinking water systems, and rivers so polluted they caught fire: to a large extent, these problems have disappeared.

They were rigorously analyzed by scientists, many working in federal agencies, and successfully addressed by informed and bipartisan regulations.

With the Trump Administration's current slash and burn approach to environmental protections, such problems threaten to move from the pages of our textbooks back into our homes and neighborhoods.

Consider the EPA — this past week the Trump Administration issued a blanket freeze on all EPA grants and contracts, which it began selectively walking back this past weekend.

The EPA is unique among the federal agencies: instead of monopolizing authority in a single federal body, the EPA works to empower cities and states to clean up their own environmental problems.

The EPA accomplishes this by issuing clear standards and providing grants adequate to the task.

As the EPA website notes, "Nearly half of our budget goes into grants to state environment programs, non-profits, educational institutions, and others."

So where does this money go?

Turn on your kitchen faucet and you'll likely see the work of an EPA grant.

Most drinking water systems receive critical EPA support to keep aging infrastructure delivering clean water to American households. Pulling the plug on EPA grants could have disastrous consequences for many environmental protections that often appear as local projects or state programs.

In Vermont, where we both live, EPA grants provide vital support to our state environmental agencies.

Asked about the potential impact of the recent freeze, Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Julie Moore said, "It's certainly a little nerve-racking, to put it mildly."

Moore noted that the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) receives more than 40 percent of its budget from EPA grants and contracts.

Indeed, about one-third of its employees are funded through EPA grants and contracts. (This is slightly higher than our neighboring states: Mass DEP and NH DES both receive about one-third of their budget from the EPA.)

Over the past year, VT DEC has played a heroic role in responding to the discovery of the toxin PFOA in the groundwater of southeastern Vermont and safeguarding the drinking water of impacted communities.

If EPA support were to suddenly dry up, the urgent and welcomed work of VT DEC could be hamstrung to the point of dereliction.

Yet you need not experience toxic contamination to see the local value of EPA grants.

Across Vermont, many villages, public schools, and even factories are supplied by small water systems.

Without the resources of a large tax base or even a designated mu-

nicipal department, these systems often rely on EPA support.

The Vermont Rural Water Association, itself a recipient of EPA grants, helps keep these small systems up to date with current environmental regulations.

Federal statutes like the Safe Drinking Water Act consist of three parts: clear guidelines for water quality, resources to monitor water quality, and assistance to keep existing water systems in compliance with the law.

The Safe Drinking Water Act, noted Executive Director of VT Rural Water Association Shaun Fielder, is "like a three-legged milk stool." With this blanket freeze on EPA support, Fielder commented, "they're pulling out two of those legs on us."

If the Trump Administration continues to flirt with indiscriminate cuts to EPA, drinking water systems across the US will struggle to uphold their vital work.

Without the extra layers of institutional and fiscal support, the modest systems that serve so many Vermont towns and villages will be hit particularly hard.

This politicking with EPA portends a world where Flint, Michigan is not the egregious outlier but the frightening new norm.

In the past few years, EPA grants have also played a key role in helping New England universities study the health risks of emerging contaminants like PFOA, in equipping neighborhood groups and non-profits to help cleanup brownfields across New England, and in supporting municipal, state, and federal partnerships to better protect watersheds, like the Lake Champlain Basin Program.

Even as the blanket freeze is now being walked back by the current administration, the fact that Trump is willing to play politics with EPA grants should be concerning to all of us who value the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the vibrant landscapes that define Vermont.

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