

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Hearing on “The Path Forward: Restoring the Vital Mission of EPA”

March 10, 2021

Today, we continue the Subcommittee’s long record of oversight of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

We welcome a very distinguished panel of witnesses. They have dedicated their careers to improving our nation’s air, water, land, and economy, and can provide critical insight on how to restore the vital mission of EPA. We thank them for that and the views they will share today on how to strengthen this important agency.

For fifty years, we have relied on EPA to take on and mitigate our nation’s most complex environmental threats—and its work is crucial in helping to protect public health and the environment. For example, EPA develops standards to reduce air pollutants that cause early death and worsen lung and heart disease. Every day, EPA helps ensure the safety of drinking water for millions of Americans. And EPA oversees the cleanup of hundreds of contaminated Superfund sites across the country, many of which pose enormous environmental risk.

Given the importance and scope of EPA’s mission, this is an agency that we cannot afford to neglect, and that is truer today than ever.

For example, each year climate change is contributing to extended hurricane and wildfire seasons, threatening billions of dollars in catastrophic losses to homes and businesses. And each year, we seem to break new climate and weather records throughout the U.S. In my state of Colorado, for example, we experienced the three largest fires ever recorded in the state’s history just in the last year.

And when extreme weather and environmental catastrophes hit, it is often our most vulnerable populations that bear the burden.

We see this in floods and hurricanes. We even saw this last month in Texas where many faced crushing power bills and had to wait in long lines to access food and clean water.

While the environmental pressures facing this country have intensified in recent years, certain policies have failed to keep up with the threats. To make matters worse, we have recently seen a reversal of key environmental efforts designed to make the country cleaner and healthier.

For example, over the past several years, the Trump Administration compromised or entirely eliminated dozens of important protections. Examples include the repeal of the Clean

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Power Plan; the weakening of the mercury and air toxics rule; and the rollback of fuel efficiency standards for automobiles.

Also during those years, important EPA functions were put at risk. For instance, pollution inspections fell considerably at times, threatening the agency's ability to hold polluters accountable and set a level playing field.

The application of science—traditionally the backbone of EPA's decision-making—was not only sidelined but in certain places denied. For example, the term "climate change" disappeared from thousands of federal websites and official communications.

Panels of independent experts who provided crucial input on air pollution science were suddenly dismissed. Staff departed EPA at alarming rates, sometimes choosing to leave the agency after raising concerns about political interference in the scientific process.

So, as we look to again empower EPA, we cannot focus on regulations and policies in isolation. We must also build the institutional capacity, scientific integrity, and credibility of EPA itself. And we must fully support EPA's career workforce so that it can address the environmental problems of today and the future.

While EPA faces significant challenges today, there are also opportunities. History has shown that environmental and economic progress are not mutually exclusive, but, if done right, reinforcing.

For example, the benefits of air regulations implemented by EPA over the past thirty years are estimated to be 30 times greater than their costs. Likewise, efforts to remove lead from gasoline have saved trillions of dollars by substantially curbing childhood lead poisoning. In other words, a strong EPA can go hand in hand with a strong economy.

Because of EPA's past successes and committed new leadership, I am hopeful for the future.

Starting on day one, the Biden Administration has shown a desire to get EPA's mission back on track. President Biden has ordered an immediate review of dozens of rollbacks issued in the last administration and has stressed the importance of a government-wide approach to addressing climate change. Moreover, the President has also stated that EPA will prioritize environmental enforcement in low-income and minority communities. But it will take a sustained effort by EPA, stakeholders, and Congress if EPA is to succeed in its mission of protecting public health and the environment. I hope we can all play our part, and that today's hearing will contribute towards that effort.

So this morning I am looking forward to former EPA officials and experts describing what they see as the most serious and urgent challenges facing EPA, and how the agency and Congress can best address those challenges, now and going forward.

At this critical moment, we have no time to lose.