

EPA:

Agency comes under fire for 'closed, opaque' press policy

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Decades ago, when Bill Ruckelshaus returned for his second stint as U.S. EPA administrator, employees wheeled a giant cardboard box into his office. Inside: Hugh Kaufman, an employee known for his tendency to disparage the agency's decisions in the press.

"He popped out of the box as the going-away gift for the administrator, and it was a big laugh because he was well-known by all of us as sometimes giving us a hot foot," remembered Chuck Elkins, a former EPA senior official.

He recalled the episode as an example of how EPA handled the press in the 1980s and early '90s. Managers may not have liked what their employees told reporters, but it was allowed -- and sometimes joked about.

Elkins, now retired, emphasized that he was unaware of the current situation. But the Society of Environmental Journalists made its opinion clear in a [statement](#) today: EPA, it declared, is "one of the most closed, opaque agencies to the press."

"Reporters are regularly required to submit written questions, even on the simplest daily stories," the group wrote. "Interview requests are rarely granted. Delays are routine. Replies, when they do come, are from press officers, not scientists or policymakers. Answers to requests made under the Freedom of Information Act also are routinely delayed."

In an interview today, Joseph Davis, director of the SEJ Freedom of Information WatchDog Program, hypothesized that the problem stems from a shift of priorities in the press office.

Press secretaries at EPA tend to have gotten their experience from the campaign trail, he said. While 20 years ago the agency used the press to talk to the public about environmental issues that affected them, today it mainly tries to avoid political controversy.

"The tactics are different now, and they say as little as possible," he said. "The main job of the press office -- as the press office seems to see it -- is to protect the White House from political attacks ... rather than inform the press and public."

Indeed, EPA has found itself at the center of political attacks in recent years. Republicans, many of whom accuse the agency of overreach, pounce not only on what an administrator says, but also on comments from employees.

Former Region 6 Administrator Al Armendariz faced criticism after a video surfaced of him comparing his enforcement strategy to that of the ancient Romans who used crucifixions to frighten their enemies. Most recently, Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) criticized Armendariz for an email that referred to "Gina's new air rules" -- referring to EPA air chief Gina McCarthy, now nominated as EPA administrator -- as "icing on the cake" in the agency's work to limit pollution from oil and gas drilling.

Vitter, the top Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, characterized Armendariz's words as indicative of an agency that seeks to "punish energy producers" ([E&ENews PM](#), March 12). Vitter has kept up that line of attack and, perhaps ironically, criticized EPA today for its lack of transparency in responding to his requests for information on the agency's internal communication ([see related story](#)).

McCarthy appeared to address such bad press at a symposium that the Union of Concerned Scientists held in September on public access to government scientific information. At that event, McCarthy said EPA is operating in a political environment in which the agency's "credibility as a scientific entity was being questioned."

She seemed to indicate that message control was preferable to the criticism that comes from employees freely speaking their opinions to reporters ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 26, 2012).

"It is the job of the agency to make sure that personalities don't get in the way of really discussing the science in a way that maintains the agency's credibility," McCarthy said at the time. "And that's the balance that we try to bring to it, is to just make sure we are really providing factual information, not a layer of assessment that is based on someone's personal interest or advocacy."

But back when Elkins worked at the agency, employees sometimes complained to reporters about any agency decisions they didn't like. Managers were held to a different standard, according to Elkins; they were expected to speak for the agency, and thus had to be somewhat careful.

Elkins held various positions during his 25 years at the agency, including acting assistant administrator of Air and Radiation. The rule of thumb he followed was to "write things and speak as if you're going to be on the front page of *The Washington Post*." He also quickly figured out that reporters who popped into his office could read backward.

Of course, that was long ago, under a different political atmosphere, when EPA was not disparaged as it is today. Bill Ruckelshaus, who was the agency's founding administrator, also began his second term at the agency -- in 1983 -- with the "fishbowl memo," directing employees to be as open as possible with the public.

In contrast, former EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson took over an agency that has generally shielded employees from speaking with the press. Jackson also rarely spoke to reporters beyond prepared statements and speeches.

SEJ's Davis expressed hope that McCarthy, known for her outspokenness, would reverse that course.

But until then, an EPA spokeswoman declined to return a request for comment.

An earlier version of this story did not include the name of the employee in the cardboard box or the EPA administrator at the time.