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Subject: Federal Insider: Trump transition leader's goal is two-thirds cut in EPA employees

Trump transition leader's goal is two-thirds cut in EPA employees

By Joe Davidson

Here's what you need to know about Myron Ebell, who is overseeing Trump's EPA transition. (Thomas Johnson/The Washington Post)

The red lights are flashing at the Environmental Protection Agency.

The words of Myron Ebell, the former head of President Trump's EPA transition team, warn employees of a perilous future. Ebell wants the agency to go on a severe diet.

It's one that would leave many federal employees with hunger pains, and jobless too.

Ebell has suggested cutting the EPA workforce by 5,000, about a two-thirds reduction, over the next four years. The agency's budget of \$8.1 billion would be sliced in half under his prescription, which he emphasized is his own and not necessarily Trump's.

"My own personal view is that the EPA would be better served if it were a much leaner organization that had substantial cuts," he said in an interview. Ebell is director of the Center for Energy and Environment at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a small-government think tank where he pushes the notion of "global warming alarmism" and against the science that says it's a crisis. He acknowledges cutting 10,000 staffers might not be realistic, yet he sees that as an "aspirational goal. ... You're not going to get Congress to make significant cuts unless you ask for significant cuts."

One reason he favors such drastic cuts is that what he calls EPA's "regulatory overreach" would be much harder "if the agency is a lot smaller." EPA officials did not respond to a request for comment, but a union leader did.

J. David Cox Sr., president of the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents EPA workers, said slashing staffing makes sense only if a safe environment is no longer important. “If Congress wants to repeal laws that are enforced by the EPA, arbitrarily cutting the workforce ... isn’t the way to do it,” Cox said. “If lawmakers decide that clean air and water isn’t a priority and vote to repeal those laws, then cutting the EPA workforce will be justified.”

Although Ebell was speaking on his own, his views are worth noting because they seem in line with plans by Trump and congressional Republicans to cut domestic spending and Trump’s directives to freeze federal hiring and reduce government regulations.

Furthermore, Ebell’s selection as head of the EPA transition team was an indication of the agency’s likely direction under Trump, as is the president’s pick for the agency’s administrator.

The first line of a [2011 article](#) by Ebell said, “The global warming fad is waning.” Ebell wrote that “complementing the weak scientific case for alarm, many people have realised that warmer climates are more pleasant and healthier.” After Trump’s electoral college victory in November, another Ebell article said former president Barack Obama’s climate change actions “pose a grave threat to our economy and especially to the health and well-being of poor people.” A transition team news release quoted Trump saying EPA had “an out-of-control anti-energy agenda.”

We don’t need Ebell or the transition team to know Trump’s thoughts on global warming and other agency policies. He’s repeatedly called climate change a hoax. Scott Pruitt, his choice to run the agency, used much of his time as Oklahoma attorney general [fighting the agency](#) on a variety of issues. In a [September interview](#) with The Washington Post about attempts to cut carbon emissions by regulating power plants, Pruitt said EPA actions were “entirely inconsistent with its constitutional and statutory authority.”

But Ebell’s thoughts on agency size and staffing are instructive.

Under Obama, the EPA described its actions to reduce power plant and vehicle pollution as “bold and achievable steps” to fulfill its statutory obligation. In the 2011 article, Ebell used similar language to describe proposals to abolish the EPA as “bold and visionary.”

Bold? Yes. Visionary? Only if declaring EPA headquarters a hazardous waste site is part of the vision.

Because of expected domestic spending reductions under Trump, Ebell said “EPA is looking at a significant cut every year for the duration of the Trump administration.” And because Trump plans to keep grants to the states for environmental infrastructure, like water treatment plants, which amount to about half of EPA’s budget, Ebell said, “I don’t see any way you can make those (other budget) cuts without reducing the number of employees.”

At his confirmation hearing, President-elect Trump's Environmental Protection Agency administrator nominee Scott Pruitt outlined his plan for the agency. (Reuters)

If Ebell’s prescription is filled, it “would cripple environmental protection across-the-board, putting at risk the health and well-being of every man, woman and child in our country,” said Scott Slesinger, legislative director of the National Resources Defense Council. “We’d face greater exposure to contaminated drinking water, toxic air pollution, unsafe pesticides, stalled Superfund cleanups, hazardous oil and waste spills and a host of other dangers — not the least of which is dangerous climate change.”

For employee advocates, EPA staffing cuts would be one more front in what is shaping up to be a long and protracted struggle with the Trump administration.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) is getting ready.

“At PEER, we are reviewing reduction-in-force and other rules governing the

fate of employees squeezed out by tightened purse strings,” Jeff Ruch, PEER’s executive director of PEER, said as the organization arranges to divert staff and funds to assist EPA employees confronting termination.

“We are preparing to transform our organization into a civil service MASH unit,” Ruch added, “should the worse befall.”

We all have been warned.

With all of the controversy surrounding Trump’s executive order [suspending immigration](#) from certain Muslim majority countries, we’d like to get your thoughts on these questions: Under what circumstances, if any, do you feel federal employees should disregard an administration’s policies? If you are a federal employee, would you ever consider disregarding an administration policy? Send your replies to joe.davidson@washpost.com with “disregarding policy” in the subject line.

Read more:

[Energy Dept. rejects Trump’s request to name climate-change workers, who remain worried](#)

[Trump might revisit environmental rules going back decades, transition adviser says](#)

[Trump names Scott Pruitt, Oklahoma attorney general suing EPA on climate change, to head the EPA](#)

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