

## Three Former E.P.A. Leaders: You'll Miss It When It's Gone

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Credit...Michael Swensen/Getty Images

**By William K. Reilly, Christine Todd Whitman and Gina McCarthy**

The writers are former Environmental Protection Agency administrators.

*This article has been updated to include new information about the Trump administration's plans.*

In his first [official cabinet meeting](#) of his second term, President Trump on Wednesday indicated that the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), the arm of the federal government essential to protecting our health and environment, is among the top targets for the next wave of major work force reductions. Mr. Trump said about 65 percent of the roughly 15,000 people working there could be fired. An [E.P.A. official later said](#) the president was referring to cuts to the agency's budget, not to personnel.

As former E.P.A. heads under both Republican and Democratic administrations, we fear that such cuts would render the agency incapable of protecting Americans from grave threats in our air, water and land.

While there are opportunities to make the agency [more efficient](#) and better at enforcing laws, Americans across every state, city and local community would suffer the effects of deep cuts. E.P.A. public servants defend [us and the environment](#) from harmful pollution every day not in hopes of attention or bigger paychecks or to execute the wishes, wants or needs of billionaires

looking to play on a bigger stage. They do it for all Americans and because of laws such as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. This is an agency that sets standards and regulations according to science and the laws and funding approved by Congress.

### **A changing climate, a changing world**

**Climate change around the world:** In [“Postcards From a World on Fire,”](#) 193 stories from individual countries show how climate change is reshaping reality everywhere, from dying coral reefs in Fiji to disappearing oases in Morocco and far, far beyond.

**The role of our leaders:** Writing at the end of 2020, Al Gore, the 45th vice president of the United States, [found reasons for optimism](#) in the Biden presidency, a feeling perhaps borne out by the passing of [major climate legislation](#). That doesn't mean there haven't been criticisms. For example, Charles Harvey and Kurt House argue that [subsidies for climate capture technology](#) will ultimately be a waste.

**The worst climate risks, mapped:** In this feature, [select a country](#), and we'll break down the climate hazards it faces. In [the case of America](#), our maps, developed with experts, show where extreme heat is causing the most deaths.

**What people can do:** Justin Gillis and Hal Harvey describe [the types of local activism](#) that might be needed, while Saul Griffith points to how [Australia shows the way on rooftop solar](#). Meanwhile, small [changes at the office](#) might be one good way to cut significant emissions, writes Carlos Gamarra.

When the next catastrophe that spews pollutants into the air or contaminants into our drinking water or food supply arrives, who will deal with the emergency and its aftermath?

After [wildfires](#) devastated Maui in 2023, E.P.A. emergency workers partnered with people on the ground to minimize residents' exposure to dangerous air. After the [train derailment](#) in East Palestine, Ohio, the E.P.A. was on the scene monitoring contaminated air, water and soil, managing the cleanup and [holding the railway company Norfolk Southern responsible](#) for unlawfully discharging pollutants and hazardous substances. When states and cities suffer from floods, wildfires and oil spills, they rely on the E.P.A. to act fast so that harm to humans is mitigated and small businesses and local tourism can quickly recover.

Most of E.P.A.'s work happens behind the scenes, like when one of its enforcement teams raided a warehouse in Colorado full of mislabeled oil barrels that had been prepared for a landfill and discovered they contained nuclear waste. When acid rain was contaminating forests and water bodies throughout the Northeast, [E.P.A. staff members located the sources and reduced the pollution](#). Asbestos, lead and copper in the water went undetected before agency scientists tested it. Without this arm of the executive branch, most of these problems would never have been remedied. Threats like these will recur, but if Mr. Trump guts the agency, no one will be there to step in.

A vacuum is what [led to the E.P.A.'s](#) creation in the first place — by [President Richard Nixon](#), in 1970. In the years since, the agency has implemented major legislation that Congress passed to clean up our land, water and air. [Between 1970 and 2019](#), E.P.A. cut emissions of common air pollutants by 77 percent, while private sector jobs grew 223 percent and our gross domestic product grew almost 300 percent. One [analysis](#) of the Clean Air Act estimated that its many

benefits, such as fewer premature deaths, heart attacks, emergency room visits and lost school and work days, exceeded its costs by more than 30 to one.

The E.P.A. does not act in isolation. Every year, [more than \\$4 billion](#), about 40 percent of the agency's funding, goes to states, local governments, tribal nations and other entities. The administration should not interfere with these long-held partnerships. Abandoning them will have ripple effects on businesses that clean up pollution and will slow down communities working to strengthen grid reliability and invest in clean energy. It will harm our ability to replace dirty school buses with ones that don't pollute, switch out lead pipes, stop forever chemicals from entering our drinking water, tackle our nation's most contaminated lands and focus resources on communities most in need.

William K. Reilly was the seventh E.P.A. administrator. Christine Todd Whitman was the ninth E.P.A. administrator. Gina McCarthy was the 13th E.P.A. administrator.