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EPA Exodus: Nearly 1,600 Workers Have Left Since Trump Took Office, Analysis Shows

"My feeling was I could do better work to protect the environment outside the EPA," says one former agency employee

by Jessica Corbett, staff writer

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A view of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) headquarters on March 16, 2017 in Washington, D.C. (Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Since President Donald Trump took office, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has seen an exodus of nearly 1,600 former federal employees, including some who say they "did not want to any longer be any part of this administration's nonsense" and believed they "could do better work" elsewhere, according to a new [report](#) from the *Washington Post*.

"I felt it was time to leave given the irresponsible, ongoing diminishment of agency resources, which has recklessly endangered our ability to execute our responsibilities as public servants."

—Ann Williamson, former EPA scientist

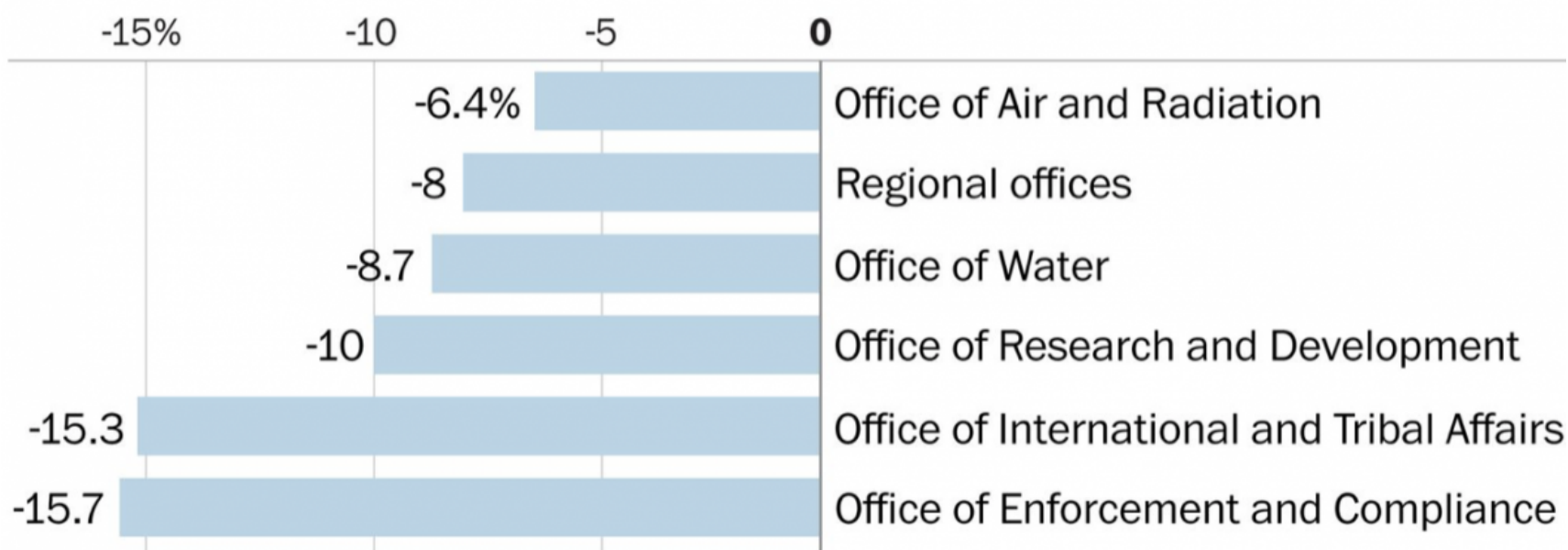
"I felt it was time to leave given the irresponsible, ongoing diminishment of agency resources, which has recklessly endangered our ability to execute our responsibilities as public servants," Ann Williamson, a scientist and longtime supervisor in the EPA's Region 10 Seattle office, who left in March after 33 years, told the *Post*.

"It's really awful to feel like you don't have any role to play, that there's not any interest in the work you're doing," said Betsy Smith, who retired from the EPA's Office of Research and Development in June after 20 years there. "My feeling was I could do better work to protect the environment outside the EPA."

At least 260 scientists, 185 "environmental protection specialists," and 106 engineers are among those who have left the EPA during the Trump era, according to the *Post*'s review of data released under the Freedom of Information Act, and "those who have resigned or retired include some of the agency's most experienced veterans, as well as young environmental experts who traditionally would have replaced them—stirring fears about brain drain at the EPA."

Under Trump, many EPA offices have seen staffs dwindle

The EPA has lost 8 percent of its workforce during the first 18 months of the administration, shrinking the agency to a size not seen since the Reagan era. Here are some of the offices most affected.



Source: EPA

BRADY DENNIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

"Hundreds of employees accepted buyouts last summer, and records show that nearly a quarter of the agency's remaining 13,758 employees are now eligible to retire," the newspaper reports. "As the departures continue, some EPA workers have voiced worries that the administration's refusal to fill vacancies with younger employees has effectively blocked the pipeline of new talent."

During the president's first 18 months in office, the EPA has hired fewer than 400 new employees. With limited hiring and a flood of departures, the agency's workforce has declined by 8 percent—or, as the *Post* noted, "to levels not seen since the Reagan administration, which has always been the administration's vision for the agency."

Trump's first EPA head, Scott Pruitt—who [stepped down](#) in July amid a flurry of ethics scandals—[reportedly](#) bragged to the president in April that agency staffing was "down to Reagan-era levels," and on the campaign trail, Trump had promised to dismantle the agency "in almost every form," telling his supporters, "We're going to have little tidbits left."

Despite mounting fears of brain drain and that the agency may have too few employees to be effective, under the Trump administration, it seems unlikely that the numbers will rise any time soon. Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler, the former coal lobbyist who took the helm after Pruitt's resignation, told the *Post* in a statement on Friday, "With nearly half of our employees eligible to retire in the next five years, my priority is recruiting and maintaining the right staff, the right people for our mission, rather than total full-time employees."

The *Post* report echoes findings from a survey of 63,000 scientific experts across 16 federal agencies—[published](#) by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) last month—which outlined how the administration is "sidelining science" across the federal government, with staffers reporting issues including "censorship and self-censorship, political interference in scientists' work, low morale, decreased agency effectiveness, and dwindling resources."

When the survey results were released, Andrew Rosenberg, director of UCS's Center for Science and Democracy and an ex-senior scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), warned, "the challenges we're seeing for scientists in the Trump administration are serious," and "we can't afford to have these agencies hollowed out or let their work be manipulated for political reasons."

Dan Costa, former director of the EPA's national air, climate, and energy research program, left in January after 34 years with the agency. He told the *Post* that near the end of his time there, he "had young people come into my office, close the door and say, 'What should I do? Should I be looking for a job somewhere else?'" Costa's advice was to "test the waters," but of Trump's appointees, he warned, "These people are like termites, gnawing at the foundation."

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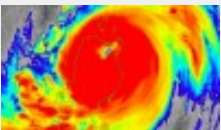
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