



Resetting the Course of EPA

Investing in EPA's Workforce



This paper is part of the [Resetting the Course of EPA](#) project by the [Environmental Protection Network \(EPN\)](#), a bipartisan network of more than 500 former EPA career employees and political appointees across the country who served under multiple Democratic and Republican administrations.

Resetting the Course of EPA outlines specific and actionable steps that EPA leadership can take to reset the course of the agency to address the most significant and pervasive threats to public health and our environment. As there is no single roadmap, EPN looks forward to collaborating with others to advance the dialogue around the future of EPA and set ideas into motion that will better protect the health and wellbeing of everyone.

Additional Resetting the Course of EPA documents are available here:

<https://www.environmentalprotectionnetwork.org/reset>

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Summary

Declining funding for staffing over the past decade has profoundly affected EPA’s ability to deliver on mission-critical functions. Complex challenges of the 21st century cannot be successfully addressed unless EPA leadership rebuilds the capabilities, productivity, and morale of the EPA workforce, and creates a more inclusive workforce that reflects the communities EPA serves. Strengthening EPA’s operational capacity, especially during a period in which the impacts of the pandemic on the workplace will need to be addressed, will allow the leadership team to invest in key priorities and build for long-term success.

Recommendations

1. **Set the example for integrity, communication, and collaboration with EPA staff and external partners.** As key positions are filled promptly with experienced and fully vetted executives, the leadership team can affirm its commitment to integrity in public service, building trust and communication with managers and staff; workplace diversity and opportunities; and collaboration with EPA’s vital partners in tribal, state, territorial, and local government. [\[Read More\]](#)
2. **Bolster EPA staffing/workforce planning.** EPA must expand upon earlier efforts to conduct rigorous workforce planning and analysis across all programs. This will allow EPA to fully assess current gaps, set priorities, develop a strategy to address those priority needs, and remedy barriers to filling critically-needed positions. [\[Read More\]](#)
3. **Strengthen recruitment and hiring of diverse staff to meet critical needs.** Given the serious reductions in EPA staffing, there is an urgent need to significantly strengthen EPA’s recruitment and pace of hiring staff with the skills and experience needed to address pressing needs in science, technology, analytics, and mission support. Place emphasis on increasing the representation of people of color within EPA’s workforce to fill historic gaps. [\[Read More\]](#)
4. **Strengthen staff development.** To build staff capabilities and skills, leadership should focus on the needs of the current workforce for career-long, enhanced training and development, and opportunities for advancement. EPA should ensure adequate funding; expand opportunities for voluntary cross-program details; and support programs such as the First Line Supervisors program, the Senior Executive Service (SES) Candidate Development Program, and mentoring. [\[Read More\]](#)
5. **Strengthen key internal partnerships to address important workforce issues and support an inclusive workplace.** Building and sustaining partnerships with EPA bargaining units and other key stakeholders is critical to supporting a working environment that values individual differences, and also to addressing pressing workforce issues, such as supporting productive and safe workplace solutions, particularly telework, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[Read More\]](#)

Recommendation #1: Set the example for integrity, communication, and collaboration with EPA staff and external partners.

A successful EPA is built with a strong team in place, ready to work with managers and staff. EPA leadership should affirm its commitment to integrity in public service, building trust and communication with managers and staff, workplace diversity and opportunities, and collaboration with EPA’s partners in tribal, state, territorial and local government.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Meet with predecessor(s) to understand key issues and relationships, and also with key internal (e.g., unions) and external (e.g., states) partners. Confer with the extensive network of former EPA career executives who can offer the benefit of their experience: what has worked well, what are lessons learned, etc.
- ❖ Seek out and develop relationships with current career staff, particularly during the transition, to build trust and momentum and to communicate effectively with the career workforce. Include career staff in decision meetings as an important step in building this trust and communication.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Promptly fill all key leadership appointments, particularly the Deputy Administrator (DA), Assistant Administrators (AA), and Regional Administrators (RA), with experienced executives. Candidates should be identified early and proper vetting completed.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Take the initiative to sustain strong communications internally and externally, and fill key appointments as soon as possible to ensure continuity in leadership and direction for EPA in carrying out its important mission.

Recommendation #2: Bolster EPA staffing/workforce planning.

To provide the foundation for a strong workforce to meet its important mission responsibilities, the agency needs to review and expand upon earlier work on workforce planning and analysis. These efforts need to fully assess where EPA needs to place different types and levels of staffing to match an updated inventory of priority and continuing work.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Analyze data on gaps in the workforce. Identify what expertise is needed, at what level, where, and develop a strategy and priorities to meet critical near-term needs as well as to build for the future. Focus on rebuilding talent at the entry level, and identify any critical gaps at levels requiring more experience. Expand upon successful workload analyses conducted in the past, for example, for the regional Air and National Environmental Policy Act workforce in recent years, and initiated for Superfund response staff.

- ❖ Assess EPA’s workforce diversity. Each year, EPA prepares a diversity data report for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ([Management Directive 715 Report](#)) that provides a snapshot of the workforce. EPA leadership should meet early with the staff who prepare the report to understand progress and barriers in upward mobility and senior hiring. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, for example, 56% of SES-level senior managers were male and 80% were white.
- ❖ Update information on available special authorities for hiring quickly and share with agency hiring managers. To hire quickly to meet critical needs, the agency should draw upon existing programs and authorities that allow for expedited hiring. Many of these programs are seldom used or may be unknown to some hiring managers.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Identify any significant impediments to hiring for key positions, and develop or update the plan for addressing these issues. The agency should “take stock” of any agency or government-wide policies or constraints, besides resources, that are an impediment to quickly hiring to fill critical positions. These issues should be reviewed and a plan updated or developed to address them. As in the past, the agency can use the agency senior leaders at the Deputy RA/AA level to provide input to identify and overcome EPA Shared Service Center and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issues that are impeding timely hiring. For example, currently OPM requires that successful candidates for first-line management positions must meet certain technical requirements based on the mix of administrative, technical, legal, and scientific background/classifications of the staff in the branch or unit. This significantly limits EPA’s flexibility to assign managers of varied backgrounds to fill EPA’s important first-line management positions, and impedes efforts to increase diversity at the management level.
- ❖ Communicate EPA’s workforce diversity assessment, needs, and action steps to each region, headquarters program office, and lab.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Continue to conduct more rigorous workload analysis of the major programs to ensure resources are aligned with work priorities.
- ❖ Continue taking needed steps to address any significant impediments to hiring. This includes any EPA or government-wide policies/issues that may be hindering timely hiring. In addition, the agency should continue to work with OPM to advocate for making the application process through USAJobs as user-friendly as possible.

Recommendation #3: Strengthen recruitment and hiring of diverse staff to meet critical needs.

Given the major reductions in EPA staffing over the past decade, the most urgent priority is to significantly strengthen recruitment and hiring to enable EPA to carry out its critical mission of protecting human health and the environment.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Increase hiring of a diverse pool of talented staff.
- ❖ Articulate an agency-wide understanding among EPA senior executives of the mix of skills, expertise, and experience needed in science, technology, analytics, and mission support.
- ❖ Seek an adequate pool of male and female candidates with diverse backgrounds at all levels of EPA, especially for management opportunities.
- ❖ Support greater use of special hiring authorities, and allow over-ceiling hires to address long-standing shortfalls in staffing.
- ❖ Give flexibility and authority to regions and headquarters program offices to hire directly at the entry levels (i.e., GS 7 and 9).

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Expand [Pathways Program](#) internships and employment opportunities for current students, recent graduates, and those with an advanced degree. These programs can attract bright, talented young people who can grow and bring vital energy and new ideas to EPA. Give greater emphasis to the placement of successful hires in career positions once they complete their programs.
- ❖ Refresh recruiting strategies to attract strong candidates. Establish and/or refresh relationships with outside organizations, such as universities, community-based organizations, and the private sector, to arrange opportunities to hold discussions to share EPA’s compelling mission and meet potential candidates. Update recruiting approaches to today’s virtual environment to help attract talent at both the entry and mid-management levels, as needed.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Invest in a significant, purposeful hiring campaign over multiple years, in which EPA would hire 500-1,000 of the best and brightest graduates, with management, technical, and project-management training, and increase the diversity of its workforce. Through a centralized authority and funding source, build a cohort and identity (similar to the [Presidential Management Fellow](#) program and former EPA Intern program) to provide experience across multiple programs.
- ❖ Expand relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, and other schools or community-based groups that graduate or support underrepresented candidates. Launch a marketing campaign that promotes EPA public service as a very meaningful career, makes job opportunities more visible, and makes EPA’s staffing needs known.

- ❖ Consider creative hiring methods if short-term help is needed. The agency’s priority should focus on rebuilding the workforce with diverse, talented young people. If short-term help is needed as a bridge to this new workforce, EPA could consider various hiring mechanisms such as bringing back experienced retired employees on a short-term basis.

Recommendation #4: Strengthen staff development.

To continue to build staff capabilities and skills, leaders should focus on enhancing development of EPA’s workforce. Such development opportunities should be a part of every employee’s life at EPA, a career-long investment critical to growing and enhancing EPA’s ability to respond to myriad complex challenges.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Ensure fully funded full-time equivalents in regions and headquarters program offices to ensure each EPA component can use its financial resources to equitably support training and development of its employees.
- ❖ Ensure availability of training and development funding, and establish consistent policy to enable headquarters, regional, and laboratory staff attendance at scientific/technical conferences and key meetings.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Establish expanded opportunities for voluntary cross-program details/rotations (within EPA and with state/local agencies through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act program) by identifying, understanding, and addressing the obstacles to these opportunities. Establish human resource policies and procedures that facilitate movement of staff across unit and program lines. Expand current opportunities for headquarters, regional and laboratory staff to apply for details to promote enhancing skills, motivation, and building successful intergovernmental relationships. Explore use of details/rotations to increase development and advancement opportunities for women, especially in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.
- ❖ Commit to the next [SES Candidate Development Program](#), purposefully drawing a diverse cadre of candidates with administrative, technical, and legal backgrounds. Ensure meaningful scientific and technical career paths are available to complement the management career path.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Launch expanded voluntary cross-program details/rotations. Building on the foundation established early on, including the program process and identification of available detail/rotational opportunities, launch the program and promote participation across the agency.
- ❖ Continue to support first-line supervisors, as part of EPA’s larger goal of expanding cross-agency collaboration and helping first-line managers develop into future EPA senior managers. Support for the current first-line supervisors group from senior leaders is critical, as capable first-line supervisors

also hold the key to retention of staff. This group provides important advice to senior leaders on key management issues, and supports and encourages first-line supervisors to reward performance, address underperformance, and manage resources to advance the mission.

- ❖ Sustain mentoring and other staff development programs for managers and staff, building on successful examples in headquarters and the regions. Through training and other development support, the Upward Mobility program helps employees in lower-level positions to attain their full employment potential and advance to higher-level positions.

Recommendation #5: Strengthen key internal partnerships to address important workforce issues and support an inclusive workplace.

Building and sustaining partnerships with the leaders of EPA bargaining units and other stakeholders is critical to addressing important workforce issues, such as cultivating support for productive and safe workplace solutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, strong partnerships and communications are important in fostering a workplace environment that values diversity and inclusion in EPA’s operations.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Engage EPA’s bargaining units early on to review and discuss key issues pertaining to EPA’s workforce and opportunities for enhancing EPA’s work environment. Continue regular, ongoing dialogue and reestablish/refresh agreements with the employee unions.
- ❖ Address any immediate challenges related to workplace solutions in response to COVID-19, including as needed:
 - ◆ Address employee concerns about health and safety.
 - ◆ Provide needed support for telework, and harmonize telework approaches/rules across the organization. Ensure technical, legal, and administrative staff have the needed equipment and information technology support to be productive. Ensure all critical EPA data systems can be accessed remotely by users.
 - ◆ Encourage manager/staff communications, interactions, and teambuilding tailored to remote working conditions, including regular division and branch meetings to ensure staff are connected and communicate with their colleagues. Consider adding chat tools to facilitate staff interactions.
 - ◆ Consider implementation of innovative workplace practices identified by the Partnership for Public Service and other organizations and agencies/departments.
 - ◆ Plan for onboarding of new employees to facilitate interaction with supervisors and colleagues.

Participants in the EPN Workgroup

Investing in EPA's Workforce

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