



Environmental Protection Network

Resetting the Course of EPA

Strengthening EPA's Credibility



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>

For more information, please contact EPN: reset@environmentalprotectionnetwork.org

For press inquiries, please contact: press@environmentalprotectionnetwork.org

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Summary

Confidence in government has been on the wane for decades, which has undermined EPA efforts over many years to fulfill its mission to protect people’s health and the environment. Actions during the Trump administration have further decreased public confidence in the agency’s credibility, undercut its historic dedication to high ethical standards, and affected employee morale. Early steps by EPA leadership to reaffirm the core values and practices that have served the agency over 50 years will be critical to rebuilding confidence in EPA.

Recommendations

1. **Commit EPA to its historic mission and ethical principles.** First and foremost, leadership should publicly reaffirm a fundamental commitment to EPA’s core mission of protecting human health and the environment, and the agency’s dedication to high ethical standards. In fulfilling its mission, EPA should prioritize its commitment to communities that suffer disproportionate environmental burdens. [\[Read More\]](#)
2. **Build morale, expertise, and institutional knowledge.** Leadership should commit to valuing the input of career staff at all levels, which is essential to turning the agency around. It should make early efforts to build trust between political appointees and career staff, especially senior career officials on staff during the prior administration. EPA should make a renewed commitment to diversity and inclusion in all aspects of EPA’s work, which will be important in building trust and improving morale. [\[Read More\]](#)
3. **Build accountability, credibility, and transparency.** EPA is most effective when managers and employees are clear and transparent about the bases of their decisions and listen to all stakeholder viewpoints. Leadership should begin by conducting business in accordance with the longstanding policy to “operate in a fishbowl.” [\[Read More\]](#)
4. **Increase public engagement in national and regional planning and decision-making.** Leadership should open EPA’s doors and ensure more diverse voices, (specifically environmental justice community voices) to be heard. This will bring valuable information to the table, express a commitment to actions that improve conditions for frontline communities, and help restore public confidence in the agency. [\[Read More\]](#)
5. **Improve relations with the print and broadcast media.** Leadership should create a more open and respectful exchange between reporters and EPA, increase transparency with the media, and allow reporters to more deeply and accurately convey the complex issues that underlie EPA’s work. [\[Read More\]](#)

Recommendation #1: Commit EPA to its historic mission and ethical principles.

First and foremost, leadership should publicly reaffirm a fundamental commitment to EPA's core mission of protecting human health and the environment, the agency's dedication to high ethical standards, and its commitment to address environmental injustice. In general, EPA should:

- ❖ Operate within an ethical framework that demonstrates that the sole mission of EPA political appointees and career staff is the protection of public health and the environment.
- ❖ Conduct its work free of political favoritism or retaliation.
- ❖ Conduct its work with no consideration or perception of personal gain.
- ❖ Consider the impacts of its actions on disproportionately burdened communities.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Publicly reaffirm a fundamental commitment to the agency's core mission of protecting human health and the environment.
- ❖ Assert the agency's commitment to environmental justice in public forums and throughout EPA, and take initial steps to engage community-based organizations in overburdened communities.
- ❖ Issue a public statement, for both internal and external audiences, committing to making ethics a guiding principle from the Administrator's office down. Key elements could:
 - ◆ Prioritize adherence to the [Standards of Conduct for Executive Branch Employees](#).
 - ◆ Emphasize both strict compliance with ethics rules and avoidance of any appearance of impropriety (for both career and non-career officials), with waivers rarely sought or given.
 - ◆ Ensure that enforcement and oversight actions are insulated from improper political influence.
 - ◆ Underscore the role and responsibility of federal officials as distinct from other employment.
 - ◆ Reaffirm the independence and authority of the Inspector General.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ During standard ethics training for political appointees, emphasize situations that might be confusing to non-career staff (such as relationships with prior employers or clients, or participation in outside functions).
- ❖ In considering new appointees, pay close attention to past relationships that could create conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest
- ❖ Establish a cross-agency team of career officials, possibly led by the Deputy General Counsel with representatives from each headquarters program office and at least half the regions, to identify priority topics for communication to staff and in ethics training.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Review overall management of ethics oversight in the agency, including the relative roles of the Office of General Counsel (OGC) and program and regional ethics officials. The review should consider the quality of implementation, and balance the value of resident expertise in programs with placing demands on officials with limited expertise.
- ❖ Reinforce initial ethics training for political appointees, a refresher training after three months, and annual training thereafter.
- ❖ Sustain the agency's public and internal commitment to ethics and ethics training, including sending an annual message to staff from the Administrator affirming the agency's commitment to ethics.

Recommendation #2: Build morale, expertise, and institutional knowledge.

Rebuilding the morale of agency career staff will be an important foundational step. Early efforts should be made to repair the working relationships between political appointees and career officials. It is also important to remain open to input from career staff who worked in prior administrations. By committing to seek and actually value career staff in agency decision-making, leadership will be able to get more done more effectively.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Hold an agency-wide all-hands meeting (or series of meetings) to convey that leadership values agency staff and wants to work in partnership with staff.
- ❖ Commit to actively including career staff in agency decision-making, creating formal processes for intra-agency vetting and disagreements, and issuing policies that can withstand administration changes and litigation.
- ❖ Reaffirm support for the freedom of staff to raise questions, point out potential risks or pitfalls, and express their views to senior leadership based on their experience and expertise.
- ❖ Establish trust in career staff, especially senior career officials on staff during the prior administrations.
- ❖ Recognize the role of senior career staff and include them in major policy decisions.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Develop, with career staff involvement, a comprehensive strategy for reinvesting in EPA employees, rebuilding the spirit of the agency, and determining capacity needs, including training for incoming leadership and new career employees.
- ❖ Launch the strategy with an agency-wide meeting with questions from all offices and regions.
- ❖ Reinstate the practice of making the Principal Deputy in each headquarters program office a career employee.
- ❖ Revitalize the Executive Management Council as a council made up of career officials.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Carry out the strategy developed in the first 100 days (above), including delivering an agency-wide training program for incoming appointees that reinforces foundational elements of being a public servant (public trust, integrity, ethics, fair dealing, openness, transparency, commitment to public engagement), and a similar training for new career employees joining EPA.
- ❖ Include career officials in discussions of major policy decisions, and respect and adhere to the processes (e.g., the Action Development Process) through which career staff carry out analyses that inform policy decisions.
- ❖ Use the [Employee Viewpoint Survey](#) as a measure of staff morale. Require all senior managers to consider and take action on the implications for their offices. Share the results with all staff and include staff in efforts at the unit level to make improvements based on the survey.
- ❖ Rebuild working relationships with employee unions.

Recommendation #3: Build accountability, credibility, and transparency.

EPA is most effective when managers and employees are clear and transparent about the bases of their decisions. In general, EPA should:

- ❖ Model the principles of transparency, openness, and honesty at all levels.
- ❖ Be fair, balanced, and inclusive in hearing all points of view.
- ❖ Avoid providing preferential access or too closely associating with any particular external interest group(s).
- ❖ Rebuild EPA’s scientific integrity.
- ❖ Maintain a fair and non-politicized [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\)](#) response program that provides prompt responses.
- ❖ Re-establish EPA’s website as a source of complete and accurate information.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Update and reissue EPA’s longstanding policy to “[operate in a fishbowl](#)” as originally stated by William Ruckelshaus, EPA’s first Administrator, in 1983 to put the agency back on course, and reissued by subsequent administrations.
- ❖ Make calendars of senior officials available to the public.
- ❖ Commit to inclusive interactions with a wide range of stakeholders.
- ❖ Take a “snapshot” of the EPA website before any changes are made to remain publicly available.
- ❖ 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

- ❖ Adopt a policy that ensures terms used on the EPA website and in other communications are neutral, non-political, and consistent with EPA’s mission.
- ❖ Review and update policies on handling of FOIA requests, including:
 - ◆ Using the FOIA Expert Assistance Team as a source of ideas on how to strengthen the FOIA program.
 - ◆ Reviewing the level of review and control by the Administrator’s office and senior political leadership in the programs and regions to ensure that they do not interfere with appropriate FOIA responses.
 - ◆ Revisiting the “awareness review” policy, established under Administrator Lisa Jackson, which gives senior leadership an alert when potentially sensitive matters are being disclosed, but does not delay or limit responses.
 - ◆ Documenting the bases on which decisions not to release documents under FOIA are made.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Identify certain types of documents that will be made public in all cases, such as records of meetings between outside parties and senior EPA officials, and ensure all document retention requirements are taken seriously to ensure access for researchers and historians.
- ❖ Strengthen and support OGC, program, and regional FOIA teams by providing adequate funding, staffing, and training to ensure that decisions on FOIA requests are timely, responsive, and meet high ethical standards. Provide a state-of-the-art document review platform, and place all FOIA requests and responses in a searchable public database.
- ❖ Improve the EPA website archive to ensure that deleted material can be found easily.

Recommendation #4: Increase public engagement in national and regional planning and decision-making.

Opening EPA’s doors and ensuring more diverse voices to be heard will bring valuable information to the table, express a commitment to actions that improve conditions for disproportionately burdened communities, and help restore public confidence in the agency. In general, EPA should:

- ❖ Make decisions and take regulatory actions that properly consider geographic perspectives, economic disparities, and cultural considerations in decision-making. Ensure these considerations are in place prior to making decisions that impact vulnerable communities.
- ❖ Engage actively with representatives of communities facing environmental justice concerns, including capacity building efforts to ensure their full participation.
- ❖ Consider community impacts, local acceptance, and future reuse as envisioned by affected communities as a path to Superfund cleanups that better protect people’s health and the environment.

- ❖ Prepare and disseminate materials that explain environmental issues and EPA decisions in clear, easy to-understand terms, including providing materials in multiple languages to help communities with limited English proficiency.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Conduct an inventory of significant agency and regional actions scheduled during the first 100 days, and evaluate whether planned public engagement will be adequate to fully inform the actions the agency plans to take. Utilize recommendations from the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) [Model Plan for Public Participation](#), the [CARE Roadmap](#) and Environmental Justice Assessments to better plan agency actions.
- ❖ Strongly consider delaying agency actions if additional public engagement is deemed necessary.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Educate agency leadership and staff about EPA’s [Public Involvement Policy](#), and ensure that the standards for meaningful public engagement are followed for all agency actions taken during this period and into the future.
- ❖ Revisit the agency’s policy on providing materials in languages other than English, provide translators to assist non- or limited-proficiency English speakers, (most importantly review the standard policy the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) utilizes during NEJAC meetings) and prepare recommendations on how to increase the use of these materials.
- ❖ Assess the effectiveness of agency “hotlines” (especially the OEJ hotline) used by community members to alert EPA about possible environmental violations.
- ❖ Use the agency website, social media, and the press to encourage the public to report incidents.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Update the agency’s Public Participation Policy to reflect the core values established by the [International Association for Public Participation](#) (IAP2), and incorporate the use of current communications tools such as social media. Re-engage with IAP2 on public participation training for EPA staff.
- ❖ Practice meaningful public engagement early in the regulatory development process, and seriously consider public input, especially from disproportionately affected communities, before proposing regulations or taking agency actions.
- ❖ Ensure the public is given early and adequate notice of public comment opportunities, provided relevant background documents, and granted extended public comment periods to ensure meaningful input.
- ❖ Schedule public meetings on significant agency proposals in geographically diverse and relevant areas, and provide other avenues (teleconferences, local meetings) for the public to weigh in.
- ❖ Sustain these commitments and practices over the long-term.

Recommendation #5: Improve relations with the print and broadcast media.

A more open and respectful exchange between reporters and EPA will increase transparency and allow reporters to more deeply and accurately convey the complex issues that underlie EPA's work. In general, EPA should:

- ❖ Convey professional respect to reporters.
- ❖ Make every effort to meet deadlines and provide substantive responses to inquiries.
- ❖ Train key senior officials and political and career press officers to effectively explain EPA policies and positions.
- ❖ Reduce reliance on written statements to respond to reasonable reporter inquiries.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- ❖ Reach out to key environmental reporters to convey the administration's ethos of openness to the print and broadcast media and recognition of reporters as a key audience for EPA's work.
- ❖ Hold a press conference to present the administration's environmental priorities.

EARLY ACTIONS, INCLUDING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

- ❖ Conduct a listening session with reporters to discuss ways to improve relationships with news outlets.
- ❖ Set up a series of press conferences and meetings with editorial boards, introducing new team members and the work of the agency.
- ❖ Request that the Office of Public Affairs (OPA) review current operations and staffing, and make recommendations for ways headquarters and the regions can improve relations with the press.
- ❖ Demonstrate through daily interactions with reporters that they will be treated respectfully and provided responses in a timely manner.

FIRST YEAR AND SUSTAINED ACTIONS

- ❖ Create positions for career press officers with expertise in key program areas to handle routine inquiries and serve as liaisons to regional press officers.
- ❖ As Regional Administrators and Assistant Administrators come on board, encourage them to work with OPA to reach out to reporters and editorial boards on key issues.
- ❖ Create and follow communications strategies for EPA announcements that provide reporters access to substantive information on the issues, respect reporter deadlines, and provide access to subject matter experts.

Participants in the EPN Workgroup Strengthening EPA's Credibility

- Bonnie Bellow** Former Public Affairs Director, EPA Region 2
[Workgroup Co-leader]
- George Wyeth** Former EPA attorney and Director, Integrated Environmental Strategies
Division, EPA Office of Policy
[Workgroup Co-leader]
- Bruce Engelbert** Former Program Analyst, Superfund Community and Involvement
Branch, Office of Emergency and Remedial Response (OERR), EPA
Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response (OSWER); former Chief,
Response Operations Branch, OERR, EPA OSWER; former Chief,
Resources Management Branch, OERR, EPA OSWER; former Program
Analyst, Program Evaluation Division, EPA Office of Policy and
Resources Management
- Caroline Isber** Former Chief Press Officer, NOAA Office of Global Programs; former
Senior Analyst for Legislation and Special Projects, NIH Office of
Research on Women's Health; former Program Analyst, EPA Office of
Solid Waste and Emergency Response; former Legislative and Public
Affairs Director, White House Council on Environmental Quality; former
Executive Director, American Environmental Safety Council
- June Taylor** Former Liaison to Non-Governmental Offices, Office of
Intergovernmental and Regional Affairs, EPA Region 9
- Rob Wolcott** Former Senior Counsel to EPA Office of Research and Development;
former EPA Deputy Assistant Administrator for Policy; former Chair, EPA
Workgroup on Environmental Equity/Justice; former Regional
Economist, EPA Region 9.