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Talking Points: EPA Reduction in Force (RIF)

- A reduction in force at the Environmental Protection Agency would constitute a direct assault on the foundational safeguards of public health, environmental quality, and scientific integrity in the United States.
- A reduction in force at the EPA would produce irreversible damage across multiple sectors, communities, and ecosystems.
- EPA's capacity to fulfill its congressionally mandated mission — to protect human health and the environment — would be catastrophically impaired.
- A RIF at EPA would critically undermine the nation's ability to ensure clean air and safe water—two of the most fundamental pillars of public health and environmental protection. Diminished enforcement of environmental laws, weakened regulatory oversight, and reduced scientific capacity would directly lead to increased pollution, deteriorating ecosystem health, and heightened risks to communities nationwide. The consequences would be profound, immediate, and disproportionately borne by vulnerable populations.
- Short-term budget savings would be overwhelmed by the long-term societal costs — financial, environmental, and human.

General

EPA Jobs Protect American Lives and Livelihoods.
Every EPA scientist, engineer, inspector, and attorney is a line of defense between communities and pollution.

Cutting EPA Staff Endangers Public Health.
Fewer workers mean more toxic air and water, more illnesses, and more environmental disasters.

Environmental Justice Will Be Set Back Decades.
Eliminating jobs means eliminating the federal commitment to protecting vulnerable communities.

Strong Local Economies Depend on a Strong EPA Workforce.
Clean air and water are foundational to agriculture, fishing, tourism, and small businesses across the country.

The Risk Is National; the Harm Will Be Local.
Every community, every family, every child will feel the impact if EPA's workforce is slashed.

EPA Saves Lives: Clean air programs alone prevent 100 million asthma attacks and save over 200,000 lives by 2050.

Permanent Loss: RIFs eliminate EPA positions permanently — losing decades of expertise in air, water, and chemical safety.

Direct Community Harm: Children, seniors, low-income communities, and disaster-prone areas will be hardest hit.

Public Support: 86% of voters — and 76% of Trump voters — oppose weakening the EPA.

Critical Programs at Risk:

- Clean Air and Water Protections
- Safe Drinking Water Standards (PFAS, Lead)

- Disaster Response for Chemical Spills and Wildfires
- Toxic Chemical and Pesticide Controls
- Superfund Cleanup and Hazardous Waste Management

No Quick Recovery: Lost capacity cannot be easily restored; rebuilding takes years.

Environmental Rollback: A RIF is not about savings; it's about permanently dismantling public health protections.

Background: What the EPA Does for You

- Before the 1970s, state and local governments failed to adequately control pollution. Public outrage over widespread contamination of air, water, and land led to the bipartisan creation of the EPA in 1970.
- Since then, EPA and its partners have dramatically improved public health and the environment while securing overwhelming public support for its mission.

2024 EPN-sponsored national poll found:

- 86% of all voters (and 76% of Trump voters) oppose weakening the EPA.
- 88% of all voters (including 81% of Trump voters) support increasing or maintaining EPA funding.

What Reduction in Force (RIF) Means for EPA Functions

- A Reduction in Force eliminates positions entirely, meaning the expertise, capacity, and function are permanently lost unless later reauthorized and rehired, which is a slow, difficult, and costly process.
- Once a position is RIF'd, it disappears. The result is not just personal hardship for the individual but an irreversible loss of technical expertise critical to safeguarding public health and the environment.

- Communities will feel the impacts directly, especially the most vulnerable — children, seniors, low-income populations, and historically overburdened areas.

Critical EPA Functions at Risk

A. Clean Air

- EPA's clean air programs prevent 100 million asthma attacks and would save over 200,000 lives by 2050 while producing $250 billion annually in net benefits.
- RIFs would eliminate the staff who monitor air quality, set emission standards, and enforce clean air laws, worsening respiratory diseases and climate impacts.
- **Increased childhood asthma attacks**: Without sufficient EPA staff to monitor pollutants like ozone and particulate matter, urban areas such as Houston, Detroit, or Los Angeles could experience spikes in smog levels.
    - A six-year-old child in Houston may have to visit the emergency room more frequently due to severe asthma attacks triggered by worsening air quality.
- **Greater exposure to industrial pollution**: EPA staff reductions would weaken enforcement against factories and power plants that violate emission standards.
    - Residents living near an industrial plant in Pittsburgh could experience more days with unsafe air, leading to chronic bronchitis or heart disease over time.
- **Delayed response to wildfire smoke and other crises**: Wildfire smoke monitoring and public health alerts depend on EPA air surveillance. With fewer staff, detection and warnings would lag.
    - An elderly person with COPD in Sacramento may not receive timely alerts about hazardous smoke levels, increasing their risk of hospitalization or death.

- **Slower development of clean air technologies**: EPA scientists also set technical standards that drive innovation in clean engines and industrial processes.
    - A trucking company in Cleveland could delay upgrading to cleaner fleets, resulting in more diesel pollution and health risks for communities near major highways.
- **Worsening climate change effects**: EPA sets limits on greenhouse gases. Staff cuts would delay climate rules, contributing to worsening heatwaves and poor air quality.
    - Farmworkers in California's Central Valley would face longer, hotter workdays with dirtier air, raising risks of heat stroke and lung disease.

B. Clean Waterways

- EPA helps states ensure waters are fishable, swimmable, and drinkable, regulating industrial discharges and protecting wetlands.
- EPA monitors bacterial levels at beaches and lakes. Staff cuts would lead to slower detection of contamination.
    - Tourists at a popular Florida beach could unknowingly swim in water contaminated with E. coli, resulting in gastrointestinal illnesses or severe infections.
- A RIF would severely weaken oversight, leading to more polluted rivers, lakes, and coastal waters and undoing decades of progress.
- Small water systems rely heavily on EPA technical assistance.
    - A farming town in Iowa could suffer from nitrates in drinking water due to agricultural runoff, increasing the risk of cancers and birth defects.

C. Safe Drinking Water

- EPA protects over 300 million people by setting drinking water standards, including for PFAS "forever chemicals" and lead.
- Recent advances include:
    - The first-ever national PFAS drinking water standards (2024).
    - A new rule to replace all lead pipes nationwide.

- Eliminating positions means losing scientists, engineers, and inspectors who ensure safe drinking water and stop neurotoxic exposures.
    - Families in Flint, Michigan, or rural communities in West Virginia could face higher risks of lead poisoning, resulting in developmental delays in children.

D. Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

- EPA manages grants and loans that finance drinking water and wastewater systems essential for public health resilience.
- Fewer staff means fewer projects funded, risking aging infrastructure, water main breaks, and contamination events.
- After hurricanes or floods, EPA teams test water safety. Reduced staff would delay interventions.
    - Residents of New Orleans after a major storm might consume or bathe in unsafe, contaminated water, compounding public health crises.

E. Safe Land Disposal of Wastes

- EPA sets safety standards for landfills and manages hazardous waste to prevent contamination.
- A RIF would reduce the oversight needed to prevent fires, odors, and toxic leaks from waste sites, especially emerging hazards like PFAS.
- Fewer inspectors mean reduced oversight of hazardous waste disposal.
    - Residents in low-income neighborhoods of East Chicago might see illegal dumping of industrial chemicals, increasing cancer rates and groundwater contamination.
- EPA enforces chemical accident prevention rules at factories. Staff cuts could result in less frequent inspections.
    - Workers and families near a chemical plant in Baton Rouge would face greater risks of explosions, toxic leaks, and emergency evacuations.

F. Contaminated Site Cleanup

- 24 million people live within 1 mile of a Superfund site, and 78 million people live within 3 miles.

- EPA emergency teams have:
    - Responded to over 10,000 incidents since Superfund's creation.
    - Recently deployed to Los Angeles wildfire zones to assess and remove hazardous debris.
- Without trained personnel, disaster response slows dramatically, leaving communities exposed to chemical spills, radiation leaks, and toxic waste.
    - Children living near the Tar Creek Superfund Site in Oklahoma could continue to be exposed to lead and arsenic, causing lifelong neurological and developmental harm.

G. Controlling Toxic Pesticides and Industrial Chemicals

- EPA screens all new industrial chemicals for health and environmental risks before they enter commerce.
- Staff reductions would allow dangerous chemicals into markets unchecked, endangering children, workers, and ecosystems.
- Slower response to environmental disasters: In cases like train derailments or pipeline spills, EPA leads hazardous materials containment.
    - A small town in Ohio hit by a derailment (like East Palestine) could experience prolonged exposure to carcinogens if EPA's emergency teams are delayed.

H. Homeland Security

- The EPA plays a critical role in national security by responding to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats. EPA develops decontamination technologies, leads environmental emergency response, and protects critical infrastructure like water systems.
- **Delayed response to bioterrorism events**: After the 2001 anthrax attacks, EPA teams identified contamination sites in Congress and other public buildings, developed decontamination strategies, and oversaw the cleanup.
    - Without trained EPA emergency responders, future bioterror attacks could result in prolonged exposure to deadly agents for government workers, postal employees, and the public.

- **Reduced protection of drinking water systems against terrorist threats**: EPA works with water utilities to secure systems against tampering, sabotage, or cyberattacks.
    - If staff are cut, terrorists targeting municipal water supplies could succeed in contaminating drinking water, leading to mass illnesses before detection.
- **Weakened chemical facility security**: EPA enforces chemical safety regulations at facilities that store hazardous substances.
    - Less oversight means greater vulnerability to terrorist attacks on chemical plants, which could release toxic clouds over major cities like Houston or Philadelphia.

The Larger Implication: A Permanent Weakening of Public Health and Environmental Protection

- EPA's expertise cannot be rebuilt overnight. Once lost, the capacity to regulate industries, respond to disasters, and enforce environmental laws weakens permanently.
- Frontline communities, especially those already suffering from poor air quality, unsafe water, and proximity to hazardous waste, will experience the greatest harm.
- The public overwhelmingly supports EPA's work. Weakening it through RIFs contradicts the will of the people and imperils future generations' right to clean air, safe water, and a healthy environment.

Sector-Specific Risks

- **Energy:** Greater risks of oil spills, methane leaks, and groundwater contamination; destabilization of renewable energy development.
- **Agriculture:** Weakened pesticide regulation and nutrient runoff monitoring, exacerbating food safety risks and waterway dead zones.
- **Transportation:** Rollbacks in vehicle emissions oversight and infrastructure project delays, reversing air quality improvements.
- **Manufacturing:** Impaired chemical safety enforcement and hazardous waste management, elevating risks of industrial disasters.

- **Water Utilities:** Heightened threats of lead contamination and waterborne disease outbreaks.
- **Forestry and Land Management:** Delayed wildfire recovery and land restoration efforts, increasing climate vulnerability.

Regional Disparities

- **Coastal Regions:** Setbacks in climate adaptation and hurricane resilience efforts (e.g., Puerto Rico, Gulf Coast).
- **Industrial Heartlands:** Slowed cleanups of legacy pollution (e.g., Superfund sites in the Northeast and Midwest).
- **Rural Areas and Tribal Lands:** Increased vulnerability due to diminished oversight of mining, agriculture, and energy operations.

Historical Context

- The Reagan-era EPA cuts in the 1980s led to severe enforcement lapses, heightened pollution levels, and widespread public backlash. History offers an unequivocal warning: undermining EPA jeopardizes environmental progress as well as public health, economic stability, and governmental credibility.