

Americans were rightly alarmed about the effects of the recent federal government shutdown. Air traffic controllers were missing, national parks weren't staffed, and families went without SNAP payments.

But even as Congress negotiates to prevent another government shutdown, there are still people in Washington who want to shut down parts of the government that protect us - this time permanently.

The threat is especially severe at the Environmental Protection Agency, which has been overrun by political appointees who come straight from being executives and lobbyists in the oil, gas, and chemical companies responsible for much of the nation's toxic pollution. They are now regulating the very industries that very recently employed them and their goal is to erase the protections that Americans depend on to keep our families safe from toxic chemicals like lead, arsenic and mercury. They are systematically dismantling EPA from the inside out, program by program, week after week.

Congress must soon decide whether to stop this serial shutdown at EPA or allow the damage to continue. While the recent funding deal was a temporary band-aid, simply extending last year's budget and sidestepping the unconstrained overreach at the agency, the January deadline for real spending bills is fast approaching.

Two starkly different options are now on the table. The House plan is a reckless, partisan measure that would cut nearly 4,000 positions from EPA offices throughout the country, cutting critical capabilities to protect our families from toxic chemicals and other health risks.

The Senate, by contrast, is working on a bipartisan compromise that trims EPA's budget by about 5 percent but rejects the extreme and harmful dismantling currently underway. The bill would preserve EPA's ability to police toxic pollution and save the agency's science programs, meaning we can count on agency scientists to identify true risks and protect us from them.

These budget cuts match a broader pattern of actions by EPA's political leaders to remove protections:

- A proposal to rollback limits on a family of chemicals known as PFAS. These "forever chemicals" – so called because they don't break down naturally in the environment – are connected to health problems like reproductive system issues, weakened immune systems and cancer. Political leaders at EPA have even buried a report on the effects of PFAS exposure.
- A plan to delay for up to a decade rules that would prohibit coal-fueled power plants from dumping toxic chemicals including lead, mercury and arsenic into the nation's rivers and streams.
- A decision to weaken rules that limit how much toxic mercury and other toxic chemicals coal-fueled power plants can pump into the air from their smokestacks.

- A decision to give a two-year extension to more than 100 chemical refineries, coal-fired power plants and other sites to comply with rules limiting how much toxic pollution they could pump into the air.

For some of these actions, all these polluters had to do was send the government an email request to get permission to continue polluting the air. Will parents be able to get help via an email if their kids get cancer or experience learning problems because they are exposed to mercury, arsenic, lead or PFAS? Not likely.

Congress must pass the bipartisan Senate plan and help rescue EPA programs and scientists. Doing so would prevent permanent damage to EPA's ability to protect us from toxic threats and signal to EPA's political leadership that the elected representatives of the American people want to keep our clean air and clean water watchdog on guard to prevent toxic pollution and to hold polluters accountable.

This isn't about partisan politics – Republicans and Democrats alike need clean air to breathe and clean water to drink. And it's not about bureaucracy – it's about your health and the health of your kids and community. Let's hope Congress puts our health and safety first. Because if they don't step up, then EPA will step back and Americans will be on their own when facing toxic pollution.