

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION NETWORK

The Trump Administration is Considering Consolidating Regional Offices and Reducing Regional Operations – Why We Should Care

From its very beginning, EPA's focus has been on advancing environmental protection across the whole of this big country. To assure this on-the-ground presence, one of the first acts of EPA's first Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus was to set up 10 regional offices to work directly with partners in states, cities, industries and tribal authorities. Together they accomplish the daily work that moves us all toward cleaner air and water. This partnership is even more essential today in a period of declining resources and a diminished workforce at both the federal and state level.

What will be lost if the Trump Administration consolidates or closes some regional offices?

- *Regional and local knowledge:* The United States is a vast nation with environmental conditions that vary immensely from locale to locale. Alaska is very different from Mississippi in weather, terrain and the kinds of industries they host. We have mountains and mangroves, redwood forests and swampland, densely populated cities and dusty plains. Local geographic, environmental and economic conditions and the cultural backgrounds of community residents matter in environmental protection. Regional staff with local knowledge design technically feasible, appropriate and cost effective solutions to specific environmental problems.
- *Long-standing relationships:* Environmental protection has never been one-size-fits-all. No two communities in America are identical and the solutions to the environmental problems they face must reflect differing economic and cultural backgrounds, attitudes about government involvement and varying levels of environmental awareness. It takes relationships developed over time to build community support for EPA actions. The regions are the eyes and ears of environmental protection and work closely with states, tribes and local governments to understand local pollution, develop solutions and ensure that federal funding is used appropriately. Having regional offices close to where environmental protection takes place helps assure credibility and effectiveness. Regional professionals who live nearby understand the organizational and technical strengths and weaknesses of their state partners; they use this knowledge in the effective division of labor. When state environmental agencies encounter state budget cuts they turn to the regional offices for technical assistance or to provide help.
- *Specific technical and scientific expertise:* People often think of environmental protection as a system of rules. In fact, one cleanup is not always just like the others. More than 10 years ago, for example, regional employees investigating contamination at various cleanup sites around the country became increasingly aware that chemical vapors were seeping into homes, schools and workplaces from contaminated groundwater or soil. Their red flags about this significant public health issue led to procedures for identifying vapor intrusion at cleanup sites and the installation of building mitigation systems that protect people's health when the problem is detected. Proximity can also help ground-truth whether, for example, monitoring requirements in a particular permit are sufficiently protective of people in the community.
- *Watchful protection of the use of federal funds:* EPA and its regional offices are tasked to be sure federal funds are spent well and carefully.
- *Rapid response:* Many people don't know the important role that EPA and its regional offices play in responding to natural disasters, terrorist attacks, hazardous conditions and other immediate threats to life and property. These can range from Hurricane Katrina to an overturned tanker truck spewing chemicals into a nearby waterway or the discovery of leaking containers of chemical waste in an abandoned factory. Being close and ready can make the difference between immediate action and a long-term problem.
- *Information:* Elected officials, the media, community representatives, the regulated community and the general public rely on a regular and accurate flow of information to conduct their daily jobs. Regional offices are very often the source of information for elected officials from every level of government, business representatives, community-based and environmental organizations, print, broadcast and social media reporters and concerned individuals who expect quick and knowledgeable answers. Without the regional offices, it would be virtually impossible to provide this timely flow of detailed and accurate information.

- *Local economic benefits:* More than 7,000 regional employees contribute to their local economies every day. They purchase or rent housing, shop and otherwise support local businesses. In many cases, they commute to work on public transportation. The closing of a regional office or a cut in regional staff will have a measurable local economic effect.

A Few Regional Success Stories

Hazardous Waste Cleanup - Two upstate General Electric capacitor plants sent about 1.3 million pounds of PCBs into the Hudson River over a period of 30 years, where they settled into the sediment. Contaminated fish were too dangerous to eat and the local commercial fishing industry was shut down. In 1984, EPA designated 200 miles of the Hudson River a Superfund site. The communities along the Hudson were divided on how to fix this problem. Many feared that dredging would stir up the contaminated sediment. Some accepted GE's assertions that the river would clean itself. The successful cleanup of the historic Hudson River would never have happened without the expertise and commitment of scientists, engineers, community engagement specialists and lawyers in EPA's New York regional office. They worked out an acceptable cleanup plan with water quality monitoring and other measures to protect local communities and everyone who depended on the river, and they reached out to every sector of the community and economy to assure everyone would understand the science and the solution.

Unsafe Drinking Water – When a U.S. Steel facility in Portage, Indiana released hexavalent chromium into a waterway about 100 yards from Lake Michigan in April 2017, regional employees from Region 5 in Chicago immediately began water sampling. Hexavalent chromium causes cancer and it is a danger to people contemplating having children. When it is in water, it can cause eye and respiratory irritation, asthma attacks, nasal ulcers, dermal burns, anemia, acute gastroenteritis, vertigo, gastrointestinal hemorrhage, convulsions, ulcers, and damage or failure of the liver and kidneys. As a precaution, the nearest municipal drinking water supplier, which provides water for drinking and bathing to an estimated 130,000 people, shut down its water intake and switched to a reserve water supply. The National Park Service closed four beaches and a river walk. EPA water quality monitoring in the days following the spill ultimately found no impacts to the waterway or the lake, allowing beaches to reopen. Familiarity with local conditions, knowledge of the polluting company's history and financial capacity and well-established relationships with state, tribal and local authorities were indispensable during this water emergency.

Emergency Response - On September 11, 2001, while people were fleeing the city in panic, emergency responders immediately headed *into* New York City from the Region 2 New Jersey Response Center. They remained on-site at Ground Zero for months. The same happened when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans; emergency response personnel from Region 4 in Atlanta and Region 6 in Dallas were in place along the Gulf Coast ready to coordinate the massive environmental response with FEMA and multiple state agencies. When a devastating tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, killing 150 people and injuring hundreds more in 2011, Region 7 personnel from Kansas City went in to assess the damage, monitor the air for asbestos and other dangerous air pollutants, and collect and properly dispose of hazardous debris and electronic waste. These are only a few examples.

Contact for more information:

Environmental Protection Network, EPN.Main.Mailbox@gmail.com
Bonnie Bellow, bonniebellow@gmail.com, 917-572-8853