

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Critical Mission: Former Administrators Address the Direction of the EPA”
June 11, 2019

Today, we continue the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations’ long record of oversight of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

I am particularly pleased to welcome four former EPA Administrators back to the Energy and Commerce Committee this morning.

This is an important and timely moment, and it is particularly noteworthy to have a hearing in the House with four former EPA Administrators testifying together on the mission of the Agency.

Administrator McCarthy, Governor Whitman, Administrator Reilly, and Administrator Thomas have dedicated their careers to leading on environmental issues, serving in both Democratic and Republican Administrations going back to President Reagan.

They worked tirelessly to ensure that EPA, working with its partners both here in the United States and abroad, tackled the environmental challenges of the day head-on.

There has never been a more important time for our environment and our planet.

Communities across the country are facing grave environmental threats—homes and businesses are being lost to historic flooding, hurricanes, and wildfires. Our oceans are rising, threatening coastal communities. Our coral reefs are disappearing, along with vast swaths of forests and habitat across the globe and we are seeing biodiversity facing yearly declines. Across the globe and here in the U.S., we are seeing record temperatures year-after-year, increasing the risk of severe agricultural drought and leading to deadly heat waves. My state of Colorado has seen once year-round glaciers retreating while its wildfire season seems only to grow in length.

And just last week, a new report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that carbon dioxide levels in earth’s atmosphere recently hit a record high. And according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, current CO2 levels are likely at the highest level in human history. Let me say that again: the highest level in human history.

Now more than ever, we need environmental leadership that rises to the challenges of our time.

We need an EPA that will strengthen existing efforts to fight climate change, because we know that states, businesses, and cities cannot address this crisis on their own.

We need an EPA that is committed to protecting public health and the environment and we need an agency that can help the U.S. lead on the international stage. The global issues we are confronting today, not only threaten our quality of life but increasingly are becoming national security concerns.

As the Administrators with us this morning know all too well, strong environmental leadership requires an EPA with unimpeachable scientific credibility. EPA must constantly be strengthening its science to ensure its policies are driven by science, and not the other way around.

Strong environmental leadership also means an EPA that is transparent and accountable to the public, so that Americans can understand and participate in the processes that affect pollution in their own communities.

Environmental leadership also means holding polluters accountable by enforcing laws that are already on the books.

Instead of leading on human health and environmental protection, the track record of the current EPA for the last two years has been abysmal. The current EPA has abandoned action on air quality and climate change. It has done away with sensible carbon reduction limits and automobile standards that would save consumers thousands of dollars at the pump. It has attacked mercury and air toxic standards that protect communities from deadly mercury and other hazardous air pollution—which even industry supports leaving in place.

And EPA – once regarded as the international leader on environmental protection – has ceded global leadership and has effectively been forced off the world stage.

And, year after year, the Trump Administration has proposed extreme cuts to EPA’s funding, sending a clear message that President Trump intends to make good on his campaign promise to break EPA into “little tidbits.”

Of course, EPA’s talented career staff heard this message, too. In the first 18 months of the Trump Administration – as President Trump was filling EPA political appointments with former industry lawyers and lobbyists -- we saw over 1,600 career employees leave EPA, resulting in staffing levels not seen in decades.

Against this backdrop, in April of this year, seven former EPA Administrators who served under Democratic and Republican Administrations sent this Committee a letter calling for renewed oversight of the Agency.

Their message of unity and bipartisan support was clear, and we are fortunate to have four here today, so we can learn from their years of wisdom on how EPA should be run.

This Committee continues to conduct oversight on a broad range of EPA issues, including roll backs of key clean air and climate protections, the dramatic drop in EPA enforcement activity, drinking water safety, EPA’s attack on science, and ethical issues at EPA.

Now is the time for a strong and renewed EPA that will protect American communities from the many environmental threats of our time, and we are pleased to hear what additional oversight those that are here today believe is still needed at the agency.

So, I hope this morning our former Administrators will discuss the serious challenges facing EPA, and how the agency and Congress can best address the urgent environmental issues of our time, now and going forward.

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