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The Sound of Silence at the Environmental Protection Agency

MEGAN DEBRANSKI KELHART

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created on 2 December 1970 to “establish and enforce environmental protection standards, conduct environmental research, provide support to others combating environmental pollution, and assist the White House Council on Environmental Quality in developing and recommending to the President new policies for environmental protection.” In its early years, the EPA made sweeping changes to improve the environment and health of the United States and its citizens. In the 1970s, the EPA, among numerous other accomplishments, banned the use of DDT, set the first national standards limiting industrial water pollution, and banned the use of chlorofluorocarbons in most aerosol cans.

Yet 38 years after the inception of the agency, its funding and morale have undergone severe declines, and its administrator has been accused of allowing partisan politics to overshadow science. Some interested observers go so far as to say that instead of the EPA advising the president, the White House is advising the EPA.

Gag orders and a decided lack of response to staff proposals for regulating emissions are at least in part behind the plummeting morale. EPA administrator Stephen L. Johnson, in particular, has come in for harsh criticism: former EPA scientist Evaggelos G. Vallianatos wrote in an editorial in *Nature* on 6 March: “Listing examples of alleged bad faith by Johnson, the unions [representing EPA staff] essentially refused to work with him until he cleans up his act.” And in June, Robbi Farrell, head of the EPA Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance (OECA), issued an e-mail message instructing managers to remind their employees not to speak with the agency’s Office of Inspector General or the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

Nevertheless, some EPA scientists are speaking up. On 17 July, despite the Bush administration’s decision not to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, the EPA released a new report, *Analyses of the Effects of Global Change on Human Health and Welfare and Human Systems*. The report found it “very likely” that more people will die in coming years because of climate change. It further warned of greater dangers from hurricanes, dwindling water supplies, and increased food- and water-borne diseases. Prepared under the EPA’s leadership, the report was released by the US Climate Change Science Program.

“If you read between the lines, this EPA report on the health effects of climate change provides further evidence that our families and communities are seriously endangered by global warming, and that we must act now,” said Senator Barbara Boxer (D–CA), chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW).

After the report’s release, a group of EPA employees sent a letter to Administrator Johnson expressing their disapproval and disappointment over the agency’s decision in July to delay federal action on greenhouse gas emissions, and over Johnson’s public refusal of staff proposals for regulating emissions. Senator Boxer also publicly criticized numerous recent EPA decisions made during Johnson’s tenure. In sharp contrast to the accomplishments made by the EPA to protect the health of the American people in the 1970s and 1980s, Senator Boxer said, “Mr. Johnson has consistently chosen special interests over the American people’s interests in protecting health and safety. He has become a secretive and dangerous ally of polluters, and we cannot stand by and allow more damage to be done.” Johnson has refused to appear before the EPW committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding White House interference with the EPA.

President Bush invoked executive privilege in June in order to withhold documents from a congressional investigation into whether Johnson was pressured by the White House to weaken a decision on greenhouse gases and smog. Johnson also claimed executive privilege when he was asked to provide testimony to the Senate EPW committee.

The EPA’s problems go beyond the administration’s alleged tampering in regulatory matters, note some science policy experts. The agency’s budget has declined over the past six fiscal years, and so too have the budgets for the scientific research programs administered through the EPA’s Office of Research and Development. The steadily diminishing budgets have not gone unnoticed by the EPA Science Advisory Board, which has repeatedly asked Administrator Johnson to revitalize ecosystem research and put more resources—financial and otherwise—into ecological research. M. Granger Morgan, chair of the Science Advisory Board, wrote to Johnson in March 2006 expressing concerns about funding declines and “systematic bias against ecosystem research,” stating that ecosystem research at the EPA had “sustained a decrease of nearly 26 percent since 2004.” Morgan said the board was distressed that funding has been cut and work has declined.

What does the future hold for the EPA? Regardless of the outcome of the 2008 US presidential election, it is difficult to see how the EPA can fulfill its mission to protect environmental quality and human health unless its scientists are allowed to work free of political interference, and its budgets are sufficient to support that work.

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