

During the coronavirus crisis, Dr. Anthony Fauci has become the voice of reason. Much of the public turns to him for critical information about public health, while even Trump finds it necessary to listen. In the Trump era, no one plays that role in the environmental area. The result is a mindless campaign of deregulation that imperils public health and safety.

We can't clone Dr. Fauci or duplicate the unique circumstances that have made his voice so powerful. However, we can do several things that would make it harder for Administrations to ignore science:

- Congress needs to greatly strengthen laws protecting whistleblowers, which currently are much weaker than most people realize.
- Congress also needs to codify into law the existing rules protecting scientific integrity within administrative agencies. Currently there are merely internal regulations that agencies can ignore.
- Either Congress or the courts need to block another proposed EPA initiative. That initiative uses “scientific transparency” as an excuse for telling EPA to ignore important research on public health.
- We need to have evaluations of the public health effects of environmental regulation from a source that the public trusts. The best way to do so is to give the job to the CDC.

Two recent deregulatory moves illustrate the problem we're facing. Both show a willingness to ignore experts, ignore regulatory benefits, and sacrifice the public interest. One of these deregulatory moves involves toxic air pollution from coal-fired power plants. The other involves fuel efficiency standards from cars, which reduce pollution by cutting the amount of gasoline cars burn. These recent initiatives illustrate problems that have been [typical](#) of the Trump Administration's deregulatory push since early on.

The Trump Administration initiative involving power plant emissions is particularly blatant. Cutting the emissions of toxics, like mercury, from burning coal will also cut emissions of fine particulates, thereby saving many lives. At this point, the Trump Administration is engaged in a weird maneuver to eliminate the legal basis for the existing regulation, while leaving the regulation itself in effect. But, if successful, the result will be to block tighter future regulations that could save more lives. How does the Trump Administration justify this move? The answer is simple: It says that those thousands of deaths don't count, because those people will be dying from the wrong cause (particulates rather than mercury).

As a recent article in the flagship scientific journal [Science](#) by a team of Harvard and Berkeley economists explains, this makes no sense from a policy perspective and violates the standard methodology for cost-benefit analysis used by the federal government. Moreover, they point out, the Administration is also using stale data from 2011, which we now know underestimates the health impact of mercury emissions and badly overestimates the current costs of maintaining the regulation. They found “no defensible, economic basis” for the action. In fact, the Administration’s action makes so little sense that it was sharply [criticized](#) by EPA’s scientific advisory board, even though the board’s members were handpicked by the Trump Administration.

The other recent Trump Administration initiative involves a rollback of fuel efficiency standards for cars. The rollback will cost the public money in the form of higher gasoline costs; it injures public health by increasing air pollution; and it accelerates climate change through higher carbon emissions. Independent experts have been aghast since the early stages of this deregulatory effort. A recent [analysis](#) by economists at the highly respected environmental economics think tank, Resources for the Future, concludes that the existing Obama-era regulation is fully justified. Their findings “strongly suggest that these fuel economy standards have substantially benefited society on balance.” Again, even EPA’s handpicked scientific advisory board was [sharply critical](#) of the Trump Administration initiative.

These issues may seem far removed from the coronavirus, but they’re not. They involve the same blindness to science and indifference to public health that Trump showed until mid-March about the epidemic. There’s another possible connection: [evidence](#) that people living in places with higher air pollution are more at risk from the coronavirus.

The public deserves to know the truth about the ways in which regulating pollution and toxic chemicals protects public health. People aren’t getting the information they need about public health and pollution from the Trump Administration. We need to fix that problem going forward.