



The new head of the U.S. the Environmental Protection Agency — whose mission is to protect human health and the environment by developing and enforcing regulations — this week made what he proudly called the “largest deregulatory announcement in history” in the form of nearly three dozen policy reversals and “[reconsiderations](#).”

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin’s [video](#) announcement confirmed many of the sweeping changes that were reportedly in the pipeline, including trying to revoke [the 2009 Endangerment Finding and all regulations and actions that rely on it](#). (Be sure [to read](#) my UCLA colleague Ann Carlson on these moves.)

Now, announcements are not the same thing as actions. There will be litigation, public comment, and debate about upending these rules. But the attempt to reframe the very mission of the Environmental Protection Agency is already being felt by the people who do the work.

To get a sense of what’s going on inside the agency and to hear how the 15,000 or so EPA employees are dealing with it all, I spoke to three EPA union leaders. Joyce Howell is a senior attorney at EPA Region 3 and Executive Vice President of AFGE Council 238, which represents about 8,500 EPA employees. Tricia Paff is based at EPA’s National Vehicle and Fuel Emissions Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Michigan where she’s President of AFGE Local

3907, which represents about 240 bargaining unit employees. Lily Simmons is an environmental scientist at EPA's Boston offices who heads AFGE Local 3428, representing about 500 bargaining unit employees. Our conversation has been edited for clarity.

How have the first months of Trump 2.0 been as compared to the first term?

Tricia Paff: Look at the announcement that EPA is 'reconsidering' — I think that was the word they used but really it's going to eliminate — the 2009 endangerment finding that gives us the authority to mitigate the risk of climate change in vehicles. So, that doesn't really serve the American people very well. That goes hand in hand with erasing 'climate change' from the Internet, from regulations, out of existence, from contracts and grants. Now we can't do anything about it and of course greenhouse gases are pollutants that are emitted from the tailpipe of cars that are warming up our planet, our oceans, fueling these 1-in-100-year hurricanes that we're seeing twice a year, come in and unleash devastation loss of life and billions of dollars in 5 different states back to back.

Lily Simmons: What's different about this time around is it's not that they're saying, 'You can't use the words 'climate change'. What they're saying is, 'You can't *do anything related to climate change*; you can't do anything related to equity.' And equity just means that you haven't gotten any help from EPA in the last 50 years, and we want to make sure we get over there. There are large towns and cities that have staff, they have expertise, they can hire somebody with credentials to help them out. A small town in rural Vermont cannot afford that. If they are lucky, there's one person who has a science degree on their staff. What EPA is doing across all of our offices, we're located near communities and focusing on helping people who haven't had help. That's what we've been doing. But all this is very different from previous administration changes, or the last time around.

Is DOGE present inside EPA, or are all the recent changes coming directly from Administrator Lee Zeldin?

Joyce Howell: Are the DOGE people wreaking havoc? Yes they are asking all kinds of questions about grant and contract money. They are casting aspersions on the way the grant money has been allocated, the groups that are being funded, and second guessing everything that was done. They are completely going after anything that says 'climate

change' or 'climate crisis' and that's really hard because we all know the consequences of that. Every day we are losing significant time.

LS: People are frankly shocked. They feel harassed in our workplace. You mentioned the DOGE people, they haven't identified themselves. We don't know who they are. We can't pick them out if we're in an elevator with them. We don't know what kind of conversations we can have. Our local management doesn't have information because other unidentified people who don't know what they're doing are calling the shots.



What is the general mood around EPA offices?

JH: We have these personal identification cards to get into the building. I was in the office the other day and people were making jokes about how they'd put their card up to the door to get access and it didn't work right away and people were having panic attacks thinking that they had been fired.

LS: It's bizarre and distracting. I didn't get an email response from someone for 3 days and I thought to myself I hope they haven't been fired. We have away messages but they're so generic, I thought 'Have they been fired?' The way that people are finding out that people

have been dismissed, put on admin leave, the way people are finding out is just not getting email replies. Or calling someone else in the office and saying 'Have you talked to this person?' and being told 'Oh they don't work here anymore.'

JH: At EPA, people stay here for 30 or 40 years and for people to just be disappearing, it's like they've fallen off the ship, just erased. It's a feeling of loss.

TP: There's a lot of fear about having any kind of conversation in the office. Are there cameras? We definitely feel like our computer is listening to us. If I take a phone call in my little office here at home, I take the phone call in another room. People are worried about 'Are we being monitored, our keystrokes and activity? If I'm looking at the same screen for a while, is someone noticing that my mouse hasn't moved?'

LS: People are feeling really micromanaged and surveilled. Like with the '5 Things I Did This Week' email, we have not gotten good guidance from EPA career staff or supervisors about how that information is being used, or collected, or if local management is using that at all. People feel really nervous and anxious about that. As a union president, people have reached out to me about their email, saying 'Do you think this is good enough?' I can't give them any guidance because I don't know how that information is being used. And our PR folks, those messages coming out of the press are purely political, they're not based in government norms of communicating with the public. Our career staff have been told to rewrite things and that they can't put out messages at all. These things are not coming from staff. People are really concerned that the information they are allowed to share has been limited, and the information we're seeing is of a very highly charged political nature coming from the press office.

Are most people at EPA doing the '5 things' email?

JH: We've been told to do it and we're doing it, because if we don't it is insubordination.

Do you all do it too?

JH: Yes.

How is the rescinding of telework and closing of offices

around the country going to affect the work and mission?

JH: What I've heard is that it's going to be pretty chaotic, because there isn't enough room to fit the people in buildings. There's a standard for how much office space one gets. People are going to be sitting at conference room tables, open tables. We're concerned that it's going to be violating local fire safety rules, other health issues like adequate ventilation. Because EPA did all this downsizing [of space], based on the assumptions of telework for some time in the future.

TP: I've been thinking of our remote workers who applied to a job that said it was remote work. They hired people under that program. So, some of those folks that are being forced into the office, that's a bait and switch. Government made an agreement with them that now they're not honoring.

LS: Every one comes in 5 days a week and there's limited telework, nothing that appears to be regular telework. That's going to create a lot of hardship. In the Boston office, we have remote workers who work in other states.

What do you all think about Zeldin pledging to cut the EPA's spending by 65%

JH: Goodbye EPA.

TP: I think about public services, and I'm having a hard time understanding the public benefits of depriving the public of clean drinking water, of clean air. If you want to talk about the deficit and fraud, waste, and abuse. EPA is an income-producing agency; the same goes for IRS. So depriving people not only of these things that they need to keep them healthy and running up the deficit at the same time...what is the end game and who does it benefit? That doesn't look like America first to me.

LS: EPA has been incredibly successful at pollution prevention programs. We have air monitor networks across the country because of EPA involvement and leadership. In places you wouldn't be able to find those things out. So school districts can cancel school or upgrade their air filtering systems in their buildings or replace their roof tiles so kids are not exposed to things that we know are damaging to them. That kind of stuff is not going to be done, because it's going to be considered a low priority. It's going to be considered a

waste to take care of children, and that's horrific. It's a nightmare to think in this country we're not going to take care of children and the disabled in the ways that we have been for the last 50 years.

What has it been like to see the dubious allegations of criminal wrongdoing associated with the [Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund](#) grants?

JH: A couple of our members have been interviewed by the FBI. I'm appalled by it. It's a witch hunt. It's absolutely ridiculous that people who were doing their jobs, how much training these people have, how much oversight there is of every single dollar, how carefully we vet the recipients. There's nothing there. They're just doing it to intimidate and to add some non facts to their narrative.

Anything else you want people to know?

LS: We are doing everything that we can on our side to keep our agency functioning and we ask the public to do everything they can to keep us functioning. If they want to keep their clean air and water when they wake up in their particular neighborhood. Do what they can — go to the rallies, contact their congressman, make them work for this fight.