

Trump moves to shutter environmental offices across the government

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The administration plans to close the Environmental Protection Agency's environmental justice office and remake the Justice Department's environmental division.

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In a little over two weeks, the Trump administration has taken unprecedented steps to shutter or remake federal offices focused on the environment, causing turmoil and confusion for current and former employees.

The latest shake-up came Wednesday, when Trump appointees at the Environmental Protection Agency notified staff members that they plan to close the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights and place its employees on administrative leave, according to three people familiar with the matter who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

The tumult has also engulfed the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division, a little-known yet crucial office tasked with defending the federal government's environmental actions in court. Trump appointees recently announced plans to fire about 20 employees at the division, among other actions that have sent morale there plummeting.

And as one of her first acts after being sworn in as the nation's 87th attorney general Wednesday, Pam Bondi rescinded former attorney general Merrick Garland's directives on environmental justice, according to a memorandum obtained by The Washington Post. Bondi also directed the heads of all U.S. Attorney's Offices to revoke any "memoranda, guidance, or similar directive that implement the prior administration's 'environmental justice' agenda."

"Going forward, the Department will evenhandedly enforce all federal civil and criminal laws, including environmental laws," the memo concluded.

The EPA's Office of Environmental Justice was created in 1992 under President George H.W. Bush as the Office of Environmental Equity. In 1994, its name was changed to the Office of Environmental Justice after President Bill Clinton issued an executive order recognizing the pollution that disproportionately burdens poor and minority communities. In 2022, President Joe Biden merged three existing programs to create a new Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights.

Nicole Cantello, president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 704, which represents EPA employees in the Upper Midwest, said roughly 100 workers will be affected by the closure of the environmental justice office. She said it's still unclear what will happen to the other environmental justice offices in the EPA's 10 regional branches outside Washington.

Asked for comment, EPA spokesman Jeff Landis said only that the office at the agency's headquarters has not yet shuttered. He did not immediately respond to follow-up questions.

The move signals a major shift in policy objectives. Though the environmental justice movement dates back several decades, Biden placed America's racial and economic disparities at the center of his sweeping climate agenda. The Biden administration sought to steer at least 40 percent of federal environmental funding toward disadvantaged communities that have historically borne the brunt of pollution.

"Shuttering the environmental justice office will mean more toxic contaminants, dangerous air and unsafe water in communities across the nation that have been most harmed by pollution in the past," said Matthew Tejada, who served in the EPA's Office for Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights from 2013 to 2023 and now works at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group. "The Trump administration is turning its back on the communities in our country that need help the most."

The closure of the environmental justice office had been widely expected after President Donald Trump signed executive orders targeting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the federal government. Project 2025, a right-wing blueprint for a second Trump administration, also called for eliminating the office.

Diana Furchtgott-Roth, director of the Center for Energy, Climate and Environment at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that helped draft Project 2025, said closing the office would help cut costs.

"I feel very sorry for anyone who's lost their jobs unexpectedly," Furchtgott-Roth said in an interview. "I want to make it clear that these are people who do their utmost best to fulfill the obligations of the EPA every day, and that it's not their fault that the administration has changed and there are new priorities. But the federal government has a substantial deficit. They are looking for places to cut. And the environmental justice program, I think, is one area that has outlived its usefulness and often results in increases in costs."

The EPA on Wednesday also quietly took down an online screening tool that provided analytical data about cancer risk and pollution exposure in low-income areas and communities of color, according to website-monitoring conducted by the Environmental Integrity Project, an advocacy group.

At the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division, meanwhile, the Office of Environmental Justice has already been eliminated, according to two people familiar with the matter. The five employees in that office have all been placed on administrative leave, the people said.