

How Dangerous Is New EPA Chief Andrew Wheeler? Very. Here's Why.

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With Scott Pruitt's resignation as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency amid a slew of ethics scandals, environmentalists who long campaigned for his ouster should be careful what they wished for.

That is because the acting administrator of the EPA is now Andrew Wheeler, formerly the agency's second-in-command. Nominated by President Trump and narrowly confirmed in April by the Senate, Wheeler came into the job as the polar opposite of the EPA's stated mission "to protect human health and the environment."

Andrew Wheeler: Coal lobbyist

Andrew Wheeler comes to the top EPA post as an unabashed inside man for major polluters on Capitol Hill. Wheeler lobbied for coal giant Murray Energy, serving as a captain in that company's bitter war against President Obama's efforts to cut global warming emissions and enact more stringent clean air and clean water rules.

When Pruitt sued the EPA 14 times as Oklahoma attorney general between 2011 and 2017 on behalf of polluting industries, a top petitioner and co-petitioner [in half](#) those cases was coal giant Murray Energy. Wheeler was its lobbyist from 2009 until last year.

Notably, Wheeler accompanied Murray Energy's CEO, Robert Murray, to the now-notorious meeting last year with Energy Secretary Rick Perry, the one in which Murray handed Perry a 16-point action plan ostensibly designed to "help in getting America's coal miners back to work." That plan ultimately became the framework of a proposal by Perry to bail out struggling coal and nuclear power plants (Wheeler was also a nuclear industry lobbyist).

That particular proposal was shot down by federal regulators, but with Pruitt's help, the Trump administration has made inroads on most of that plan's 16 points, with devastating consequences to the environment—including the US pullout from the Paris climate accords, the rejection of Obama's Clean Power Plan, and slashing the staff of the EPA down to a level not seen since the 1980s attacks on the agency by President Reagan.

Wheeler has denied helping Murray draw up that document, but he certainly shares its sentiments, telling a [coal conference](#) in 2016, "We've never seen one industry under siege by so many different regulations from so many different federal agencies at one time. This is unprecedented. Nobody has ever faced this in the history of the regulatory agenda."

Andrew Wheeler: Longtime Inhofe aide

If it weren't enough that a top coal lobbyist is now at the helm of the agency charged with protecting the nation's environmental health, it bears noting that Wheeler's vigorous lobbying career came after serving as a longtime aide to the Senate's most vocal climate change denier, Oklahoma's James Inhofe.

After the Trump administration announced Wheeler's nomination to the agency in April, Inhofe hailed Wheeler as a ["close friend."](#) That closeness was evident last year when Wheeler held a fundraiser for Inhofe, as well as for Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming, chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works committee, which advanced Wheeler's nomination by a party-line 11-10 vote. The Intercept online news service [reported that](#) Wheeler held the fundraisers even after press accounts revealed that he was under consideration to be Pruitt's second in command.

Up until now, Wheeler has largely managed to escape the harsh scrutiny that has forced the withdrawal of some Trump appointees—such as [Michael Dourson](#), whose close ties to industry doomed his nomination to oversee chemical safety at EPA, or Kathleen Hartnett White, who spectacularly flamed out with her blatant skepticism about the sources of climate change, once calling carbon dioxide, a key greenhouse gas, [the "gas of life."](#)

In contrast to these colleagues, Wheeler has so far stuck to slickly dry, brief statements that climate change is real, while agreeing with Trump's pullout of global climate change accords. He even tried to play the good Boy Scout. After Tom Carper of Delaware recited Scouting's commitment to conservation, [Wheeler said](#),

"I agree with you that we have a responsibility in the stewardship of the planet to leave it in better shape than we found it for our children, grandchildren, and nephews."

Wheeler's long track record of lobbying suggests precisely the opposite. But Pruitt's reign was so mercifully short that many of his efforts to roll back critical vehicle emissions standards and the Clean Power Plan, and end full scrutiny of toxic chemicals common in household products, were only in beginning stages. When Wheeler was a lobbyist behind the scenes, it was easy for him to help industry erode the EPA's science-based mission of protecting public health and the environment.

As the face of an EPA roiling with disillusion and dissent among its scientists, he will not find it so easy to do the bidding of his former masters. This is his chance to act like an administrator for the people, not an abdicator on behalf of industry.

Note: This post is adapted from an earlier version that appeared April 6, 2018, when Andrew Wheeler was nominated to be deputy administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency.

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