

## Daily News

### 'Aging Agency' Threatens EPA Strength Despite Early Budget Reprieve

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Congress may have balked at Trump administration plans to slash EPA's budget and scale back its workforce but numerous senior employees are in a position to retire in the next few years, putting the agency at significant risk of a weakened workforce, particularly if top officials continue the current EPA hiring freeze and do not fill vacant positions, observers say.

"EPA is an aging agency," says Kyla Bennett, the New England director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) and a former EPA staffer. "Just by attrition, without being able to back fill, they will effectively reduce the force of the agency substantially."

Such concerns come with the White House seeking a 31 percent cut to EPA's budget in fiscal year 2018 and considering a 25 percent downsizing of its workforce.

The agency is also taking [early steps](#) to scale back its workforce, announcing in a memo to employees last month that it is planning to complete by the end of FY17 another round of early personnel buyouts to accelerate its workforce reduction plans even before Congress addresses the FY18 request.

The April 17 memo also indicates that the Trump administration plans to continue a hiring freeze at EPA, with only limited exceptions, even though the White House lifted a government-wide halt to new hiring.

EPA escaped those cuts in the FY17 spending deal Congress approved this week, which trimmed agency spending by only 1 percent and largely preserves existing workforce levels.

But Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, noted in [a summary](#) that the spending deal "rejects the previous Administration's proposed increase in staffing, holding the EPA to the current capacity of 15,000 positions, the lowest since 1989."

[The legislation](#) also warns that Congress wants to be kept in the loop on any proposals for massive reorganization or downsizing before they happen.

That reprieve for the agency has its defenders hoping that congressional Democrats, aided by Republican appropriators, might be able to preserve many EPA programs in the FY18 budget.

But advocates for the agency cite the risk that simple attrition and retirement incentives may degrade the agency even if some of the more high-profile attacks by the Trump administration or Capitol Hill critics on agency programs fail to do so.

“They are not going to be doing a lot of the organizational, wide-scale firings, certainly not elimination of offices,” says another former EPA staffer, expressing hope that the most extreme proposals for restructuring the agency will not happen. “They are going to have to look at more underhanded and devious ways to bring about staff reductions,” such as through attrition.

EPA in response to a query on how many EPA staff are eligible for retirement in coming years declined to provide data. The agency instead provided a statement. “Streamlining and reorganizing is good government and important to maximizing taxpayer dollars. This includes looking at developing opportunities for individuals to retire early. It’s a process that mirrors what the Obama Administration EPA did about four years ago, to ensure that payroll expenses do not overtake funds used for vital programs to protect the environment.”

### **Internal Data**

Assuming the hiring freeze at EPA continues, that makes the plans of EPA's current aging workforce especially important in determining the staffing strength of the agency in coming years.

Internal agency data provided to *Inside EPA* show that 38 percent of EPA staff are between the ages of 50 to 59 and 17 percent are 60 years of age or older.

These numbers are significant in part because, according to PEER's Bennett, staff who are 50 or older with 20 years experience are technically eligible for early retirements under proposed buyouts, she says.

In addition, a recent Office of Personnel Management [“retirement age and trend analysis”](#) covering fiscal years 2013-2015 underscores how employees nearing 60 may be on the cusp of retirement. It notes that the average

retirement age of full time employees at EPA from FY-13-15 ranged from 62.1 in FY13 to 62.5 years in FY15.

Bennett also cites the importance of assessing the impact of aging workforce on EPA regions, in reference to the internal data showing that, for example, in Region 1, 44 percent of staff are age 50- 59 and 17 percent are 60 or older.

Another data point is a [2016 Office of Management & Budget demographic survey](#) of federal employees conducted between April and May of 2016.

The “unweighted” data are an approximation and based on 10,156 responses -- or roughly two thirds of EPA employees -- but still show 17 percent of respondents are 60 or older and 39.6 percent are ages 50-59.

In addition, 41.5 percent of respondents said they had more than 20 years of experience at EPA -- a key marker of retirement eligibility -- with 27.9 percent reporting 11 to 20 years of experience at the agency. The survey data also indicate that roughly 22 percent of respondents planned as of early 2016 to retire between one and five years from the time of the 2016 survey, with 3.6 percent of respondents at the time declaring they planned to retire within a year.

Since the survey's completion, Donald Trump's election to the presidency has upended expectations on the scope of EPA's agenda, meaning the OMB data almost certainly underestimate retirements that will occur, observers say.

“I think more people than usual will take advantage,” of buyouts if they go forward, says Bennett. She also raises with respect to regional offices the potential for different regions to be disproportionately affected, particularly depending on the relationship between soon-to-be appointed regional administrators and their staffs. “The regions may be disproportionately affected by a buyout. In other words, one of the regions may lose dozens of employees, while others will lose none or just a few.”

Several sources also point to anecdotal evidence of increases in agency departures since Trump's victory.

A second former agency staffer says a number of senior lawyers left the agency after Trump's election victory, and is aware of a sudden exodus of some young staffers from one EPA program office spooked by Trump and early draft proposals to gut the agency's funding -- proposals that, at least for now, have not come to pass. It is not immediately clear whether those positions will be filled, the source says.

At the same time, observers have previously noted that proposals to gut EPA and eliminate offices within it face real world obstacles, including the continued need to comply with environmental statutes and the threat of citizen suits targeting failure of the agency to execute its responsibilities.

In addition, the recent FY17 spending deal indicates at least some Capitol Hill concern over changes at EPA that could decimate its staff. An explanatory statement on EPA spending, for example, says lawmakers “do not expect” EPA to take “adverse personnel actions or incentive programs” -- the latter being an apparent reference to buyouts -- to implement a number of funding rescissions called for in the spending deal. The statement directs the agency to first apply those rescissions across the workforce to reflect “routine attrition.”

A former agency staffer also notes that though morale is terrible at the agency, it is not monolithic, with staff divided into “two general camps” -- staff mulling whether to leave or “stick it out,” and others planning to “stay and do their jobs and survive this administration.” -- *Doug Obey* ([dobey@iwpnews.com](mailto:dobey@iwpnews.com))