

GOP-backed measures seek to rein in science used at EPA (Update)

February 8 2017, by Michael Biesecker

Pondering new restrictions on how the Environmental Protection Agency can use scientific data, congressional Republicans are seeking advice from the chemical and fossil fuel industries.

House Science, Space and Technology committee chairman Lamar Smith this week accused the Obama administration of relying on faulty and falsified data to justify new regulations, such as limiting carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants. The Texas Republican has been a frequent critic of climate science showing the world is warming and that man-made carbon emissions are to blame.

"With the transition to a new administration, there is now an opportunity to right the ship at the EPA and steer the agency in the right direction," Smith said Tuesday. "The EPA should be open and accountable to the American people and use legit science."

At a hearing Tuesday called "Making EPA Great Again," Smith's committee sought to build support for several industry-backed measures by calling on a panel of experts that included a chemical industry representative, a corporate consultant and a coal-company lobbyist.

Though similar bills failed in the past under the threat of vetoes by President Barack Obama, Republicans hope they could have new life under President Donald Trump as part of a broader effort to roll back EPA regulations.

Trump's nominee to lead the EPA, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, has filed at least 14 lawsuits challenging EPA regulations, including Obama's Clean Power Plan. Democrats and environmentalists are opposing Pruitt's confirmation, citing his close political ties to the oil and gas industry in his home state.

Billed at the hearing as a bid to increase transparency and make EPA more accountable to the public, the Secret Science Reform Act would require that data used to support new regulations to protect human health and the environment be released to the public.

"Only when such information is made public can other interested and qualified parties conduct independent analysis and seek to reproduce research results," said Jeff Holmstead, a former EPA official and lawyer who has registered as a lobbyist for Arch Coal, Duke Energy and other clients that profit from burning fossil fuels. "Transparency not only breeds accountability but also a healthy respect for dialogue and honest debate."

Democrats said the real impact would be to hamstring EPA's ability to finalize new regulations until legal challenges about the legitimate withholding of certain scientific and technical information are resolved, such as confidential medical records of test subjects included in a human health study.

A separate measure would revamp the makeup EPA's Science Advisory Board. Republicans say the board has been historically stocked with scientists who receive federal research grants, which they allege presents an improper conflict of interest.

"In recent years SAB experts have become nothing more than rubberstamps who approve all of the EPA's regulations," Smith said.

"Simple changes, such as eliminating conflicts of interests, adding more

balanced perspectives and being more transparent can go a long way to restoring the agency's credibility."

Democrats suggested the Republicans are seeking to stock the board with scientists paid by industries regulated by EPA.

Former Democratic Congressman Rush Holt, a physicist who is CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, warned that politicians should refrain from meddling.

"Scientists—whether in industry, academia, or the government—must have confidence that they can conduct their work in an atmosphere free of intimidation or undue influence," said Holt, who testified at the invitation of the committee's Democrats. "Policymakers should never dictate the conclusions of a scientific study, and they should base policy on a review of relevant research."

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