

EPA adviser is promoting harmful ideas, scientists say

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The Trump administration's reliance on industry-funded environmental specialists is again coming under fire, this time by researchers who say that Louis Anthony "Tony" Cox Jr., who leads a key Environmental

Protection Agency advisory board on air pollution, is a "fringe" scientist and ideologue pushing policies detrimental to public health.

In a paper published Thursday in the journal *Science*, two [air pollution](#) scientists say that Cox is ignoring consensus viewpoints on the effects of smog and [particulate pollution](#).

The scientists, Gretchen Goldman of the Union of Concerned Scientists and Francesca Dominici of Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, suggest that Cox risks upending "the time-tested and scientifically backed" process that has led to nationwide improvements in air quality and better protection of people's health.

Cox is a Denver-based risk assessment consultant who has worked for the oil, chemical and health care industries—as well as international, federal and state government agencies. Former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt appointed him to the seven-person Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee in November 2017. Congress has charged the committee with providing the EPA with scientific advice and [peer review](#) on air-pollution-related issues.

The panel is reviewing the agency's 1,800-page assessment of small-particle air pollution, also known as [particulate matter](#), which most health experts suggest can lead to illness and death. Parts of California have some of the nation's highest concentrations of fine particulate matter, so Cox's recommendations could have implications for polluted regions of the state.

The assessment, which cited more than 2,800 papers, and was written by more than 50 of the world's experts on air pollution and reviewed by an additional 52, concluded that even at very low concentrations, small-particle air pollution can be deadly.

But at a meeting in December, and in a draft letter written to Administrator Andrew Wheeler this month, Cox suggested his committee wasn't convinced, and he accused the agency's scientists of using bad science and subjectivity in their conclusion.

"My viewpoint on particulate matter science is that it should be held to the same standards as other types of applied science," Cox said in an email, responding to questions from the Los Angeles Times.

Referring to the December meeting, Cox said his panel suggested the agency include more research in its draft, provide clearer definitions of key terms and adhere "to the scientific method."

And in a draft letter to Wheeler, he recommended the EPA put together another draft and allow the committee access to other experts in the field to help them review the draft, as needed.

The committee, whose members have all been appointed since Trump came into office, is smaller than former air pollution committees. The panel is required to have seven members but in former iterations was padded with extra members to ensure a broad range of expertise.

In addition, last October, the EPA disbanded two air pollution committees—the particulate matter committee and the ozone committee—that, in the past, had contributed expertise and knowledge to the air pollution committee's reviews and recommendations.

The current panel includes no statisticians, experts in modeling risk assessment or epidemiologists, for instance. And two of the seven panelists have explicitly called for the EPA to reconstitute the disbanded particulate matter committee, while a third noted at the meeting in December that he didn't have the expertise to evaluate parts of the draft.

"Prior to the release of this draft ... without consulting" the committee, wrote Mark Frampton, a committee member and professor emeritus at the University of Rochester Medical Center, "EPA disbanded the expert PM review panel that had been previously appointed to assist.

"The seven chartered ... members by themselves do not have the breadth and depth of knowledge or expertise in many areas that are necessary to adequately advise the EPA," he wrote.

The authors of the *Science* journal paper say Cox is putting the EPA in a tenuous position: If they ignore consensus science on air pollution and accept his viewpoint, they will potentially set air pollution standards that could risk [public health](#).

However, if they refuse to follow his committee's advice, then the agency would be setting a dangerous precedent by not listening to "(what should be) its top science advisers" and thereby eroding confidence in the concept of peer review in policy decision making.

The EPA did not respond to questions about the *Science* paper. EPA spokesman John Konkus said in a statement, "We appreciate the work of the CASAC and we will review the report," apparently referring to the committee's upcoming report on particulate standards.

Since Trump took office, his EPA has repeatedly relied upon industry-funded scientists to set policy—including allowing a University of Massachusetts professor who believes low doses of radiation and toxic chemicals are good for people to write proposed rulings.

Some say Cox is part of that pattern.

"It's a doozy," said H. Christopher Frey, a professor of environmental engineering at North Carolina State University and former chair of the

air committee.

Cox "is using his position as chair to advance an ideology he personally wants to see," said Frey, who described Cox as being as far out of the mainstream as a scientist could be.

California has an outsize stake in air pollution science because it is home to the largest number of people exposed to the highest levels of fine-particle pollution. Tougher standards, and threat of federal sanctions for not meeting them, would force state and local regulators to pursue more aggressive measures to tackle emissions from everything from cars and trucks to agricultural operations.

In recent years, the number of bad air days has increased amid rising temperatures, stagnant weather conditions and a slowdown in the pace of emissions reductions.

Southern California still has the nation's highest levels of ozone—the lung-searing gas in warm-weather smog, which triggers asthma and other respiratory illnesses—and does not meet federal standards for fine-particle pollution, composed of tiny health-damaging specks of pollution that build up in winter air, lodge deep in the lungs and are linked to cardiovascular disease.

The San Joaquin Valley in particular struggles with some of the nation's worst fine-particle pollution, which builds up in the air in winter months and shrouds the area of 4 million people in an unhealthy pall.

But there is hope, health experts say. Health studies have shown that a long-term trend of improvement in fine-particle pollution is, over time, resulting in fewer early deaths and higher life expectancy. In communities across Southern California, researchers have in recent years measured children's lungs growing bigger and stronger as air

quality improves.

Scientists and medical experts have urged stricter health standards, based on the latest health studies, which they say are crucial if the nation is to continue making progress reducing the health damage from air pollution.

They say Southern California—where millions are exposed to unhealthy levels of air pollution—would benefit more than anywhere in the country from tougher [air quality](#) standards on ozone and fine particulate matter.

Reducing air [pollution](#) below current federal limits would prevent 3,632 deaths a year in California, more than one-third of the 9,320 early deaths linked to dirty air nationwide, scientists at New York University and the American Thoracic Society estimated in a 2016 study.

Cox's draft letter will be reviewed by the rest of the [committee](#) Thursday, when the panel meets again to finalize its comments to the EPA administrator.

More information: Gretchen T. Goldman et al. Don't abandon evidence and process on air pollution policy, *Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aaw9460](#)

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