

EPA moves from air to water in its criticism of California

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The Trump administration warned California officials Thursday that the state is "failing" to meet federal water quality standards, the latest move in the president's escalating political feud with the state's liberal leaders.

In a letter to California Gov. Gavin Newsom, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler threatened possible enforcement action if the state did not improve the way it deals with lead, arsenic and human waste in its [water](#).

Wheeler wrote that officials in San Francisco, Los Angeles and the state as a whole "do not appear to be acting with urgency to mitigate the risks to human health and the environment that may result from the homelessness crisis."

The administrator's accusations came after several weeks of mounting tension between the president and California officials.

This week, the EPA threatened to cut federal transportation funding from California as punishment for not submitting timely plans for controlling [air pollution](#), an announcement that came amid a legal fight between state and federal powers over whether California can set tougher car emissions standards than those required by the federal government.

In a call with reporters Thursday, a senior EPA official who spoke on condition of anonymity brushed aside questions about the timing of the agency's latest letter. The official said Wheeler's concern about California's compliance with the Clean Water Act and other federal environmental laws arose out of routine monitoring.

Yet the issues raised in the agency's letter have been on California officials' radar for years—a bill signed by the governor in July sets aside \$130 million each year to clean up the state's drinking water. And though the EPA singled out San Francisco for criticism, unsafe drinking water is a larger problem in the Central Valley, where the agriculture industry has polluted some rural communities' tap water.

In a statement, Newsom said: "This is not about clean air, clean water or helping our state with homelessness. This is political retribution against California, plain and simple."

Wheeler's letter echoes complaints made by President Donald Trump last week, in which he threatened to punish San Francisco because used needles and filth from the city's homeless population were flowing into storm sewers. He said "tremendous pollution" was then washing into the ocean and San Francisco Bay.

"They're in total violation," Trump said. "We're going to be giving them a notice very soon."

The EPA specifically called out "troubling" stormwater management and water treatment efforts in San Francisco and named concerns with 202 public water systems in California, affecting the drinking water of about 800,000 people.

"Piles of human feces" on streets in Los Angeles and San Francisco are "becoming all too common," Wheeler wrote. "The EPA is concerned about the potential water quality impacts from pathogens and other contaminants from untreated [human waste](#) entering nearby waters."

Jared Blumenfeld, the secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency, said the EPA's letter contained numerous inaccuracies, from its description of San Francisco's wastewater treatment system to its catalog of alleged violations. The EPA accused Marin County of discharging excessive levels of cyanide—an allegation Blumenfeld said is not supported by state records.

"I wouldn't want anyone to get the impression that all the environmental issues in California have been solved," he said. "But we spend a huge amount of money and time and effort, and the federal government's

portion of that is relatively small."

Although the EPA did not warn in the letter of specific sanctions, Wheeler wrote that he had directed agency staff to consider all possible options to bring the city into compliance. He gave the state 30 days to submit a plan to improve its water quality.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed said Thursday that the president and the EPA had manufactured an environmental crisis where there was none.

"I'm sick of this president taking swipes at our city for no reason other than politics," Breed said in a statement. "As I've said before, there are no needles washing out to the Bay or ocean from our sewer system, and there is no relationship between homelessness and water quality in San Francisco."

Critics of the administration noted that, until Thursday's letter, Trump's EPA had shown little interest in California's water quality.

This month, the agency announced that it was rolling back Obama-era protections on wetlands and streams—regulations that environmentalists have said are necessary to protect drinking water but that farmers and developers have long opposed.

Under Trump, the EPA has also delayed setting a drinking water safety standard for a class of cancer-causing chemicals, known as PFAS, that have been found in public water systems throughout the United States.

"Andy Wheeler and his political team have worked day and night to relax rules that limit air and water pollution," said Eric Schaeffer, a former EPA official who left the agency in 2002 to start the Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit advocacy organization.

"It's too late for us to believe the noise they are making in California reflects anything more than a White House desire to punish its enemies."

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