

600 former EPA officials demand investigation into Trump administration over California threats

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Nearly 600 former Environmental Protection Agency officials have called for an investigation into whether the agency's leaders abused their authority by threatening punitive action against California.

In a letter to the House committees on Oversight and Government Reform and Energy and Commerce, 593 signatories asked for a probe to determine whether EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler's aggressive focus on California officials is rooted in a retaliatory effort to punish the state for not backing President Donald Trump's political agenda.

"EPA's credibility depends on its commitment to use its authority to protect public health and our environment in an objective, even-handed manner, rather than as a blunt instrument of political power," according to the letter, addressed to Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, D-Md., and Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio. "We urge your Committee to determine whether Mr. Wheeler's letters of September 24 and 26 threatening to withhold grant funds and increase EPA oversight were motivated by improper partisan concerns."

California Sens. Kamala Harris and Dianne Feinstein on Thursday also called on the EPA's inspector general to investigate "whether the White House pressured the agency to abuse its law enforcement authority to single out California and the city of San Francisco," according to a news release. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., in a letter to the agency's inspector general, also echoed their support for an investigation.

The letter from former EPA officials pointed to a recent instance in which Wheeler accused the state of failing to take required steps under the Clean Air Act, allowing a backlog of more than 130 inactive smog-reduction plans.

Wheeler threatened to cut federal transportation funding to the state as

punishment. That decision came after the administration—upset that California had brokered a secret deal with automakers to improve fuel-efficiency standards—announced it would revoke California's decades-old waiver that empowered it to set tougher car emissions standards than those required by the federal government.

The battle between California leaders and the Trump administration has grown more tense in recent months, fueled by lawsuits, climate disagreements and an impeachment inquiry, among other issues. In their letter, the former officials questioned why the EPA had boosted its oversight efforts in California despite waves of environmental policy rollbacks since Trump took office in 2016.

"We hope that your investigation will weigh the effect that all of these federal rollbacks in emission standards will have when evaluating Mr. Wheeler's sudden interest in air quality in the state of California," according to the letter.

The letter also noted a Sept. 26 warning from Wheeler to California officials, criticizing the state for "failing" to meet federal water quality standards. Those complaints were echoed by Trump during a visit to the state, in which he threatened to punish San Francisco because its storm sewers were littered with used needles and filth from the city's homeless.

In response, the former EPA officials said the warning was spurred by Trump's political fury because there were other states with a comparable number of violations in which no action was taken by the EPA.

Former officials noted that Ohio, New York, Iowa, Missouri, Texas and Indiana have had more pollution sources than California in "significant" noncompliance with environmental laws over the last three years.

"Mr. Wheeler's actions cannot be treated as legitimate uses of EPA's

authority taken for the purpose of advancing environmental protection, especially considering the current Administration's record," the letter states. "Considering its enthusiasm for de-regulation and reluctance to enforce the laws still on the books, President Trump's threat to wield EPA's authority against the homeless, the most vulnerable members of our society, is shameless and morally repugnant."

The group that organized the letter, the Environmental Integrity Project, sent a second letter to Wheeler on Thursday regarding the notice directed at the state that it isn't meeting federal water quality standards. The letter included data tables alleging more than 400 examples of "significant noncompliance."

"We ask that you give equally close scrutiny to Clean Water Act violations at large municipal or industrial wastewater treatment plants in other states," according to the [letter](#), which was written by the organization's director, Eric Schaeffer, and former EPA water official Betsy Southerland.

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