

At EPA, coronavirus disrupts research and raises questions over air quality impact

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A research vessel that has collected data on the Great Lakes for 30 years

will remain docked this summer. Government scientists studying the emissions of heavy-duty diesel trucks do not have access to their labs. And Andrew Wheeler, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, is no longer signing critical regulations by hand.

In Wheeler's view, no single event during his tenure has forced more change at the EPA than the coronavirus pandemic—and that includes the climate crisis.

"I think the pandemic is more important," he said. "There's just a lot of changes in how we function."

EPA headquarters was closed and employees have been working from home, but Wheeler, President Donald Trump's second EPA administrator, has gone into the office almost every day. His travel has slowed since the coronavirus outbreak, and he says he misses in-person contact that allowed more in-depth discussions with his staff.

"There are certainly things like that that are going to have more medium to long-term impact on the agency that a lot of people don't realize," Wheeler said in an interview with McClatchy on Friday. "There are certainly lessons learned from the pandemic, and we will be changing how the agency operates and how the federal government operates because of it. But I think it's a little too soon for lessons learned on how we're going to change things."

As head of the EPA, Wheeler has navigated the agency through a series of controversial policy rollouts, repositioning its focus away from climate change toward what he calls the agency's "core missions" of providing [clean air](#) and water.

The administration's replacement of stringent government regulations meant to reduce climate-changing carbon dioxide emissions, as well as

other pollutants, has drawn widespread criticism from environmental activists, despite Wheeler's insistence that the president's policies have contributed to declines in emissions and air pollution.

But the coronavirus has created challenges for the agency both large and small.

The impact of the pandemic has affected simple functions.

"I'm now signing regulations by digital signature," Wheeler said. "The agency has never done that before. The administrator's always signed everything by hand."

The sheer scope of the pandemic in the United States is also providing the agency with large new datasets on the effects of air pollution and "forever chemicals" such as PFAS on respiratory illnesses.

Preliminary independent studies have suggested a linkage may exist between regions with poor air quality and clusters in COVID-19 cases, and that chemical agents in commercial products could be suppressing the immune system's ability to produce coronavirus-fighting antibodies.

Wheeler said he asked EPA scientists to look into whether air pollution has been a factor in the pandemic.

"I asked my scientists in ORD (Office of Research and Development) just a couple weeks ago, how soon would we be able to make determinations about the impact on air quality as far as COVID deaths?" Wheeler said. "And they said, because the COVID death statistics are honestly questionable, it's going to take us some time to figure out what the impact is and what changes will need to occur."

"We're going to have to take a hard look at the impact of COVID on

public health as far as air quality and air pollution," he added.

Research has slowed across much of the agency as employees have been encouraged to follow social distancing guidelines. A [research vessel](#) that has sailed the Great Lakes for the past 30 years collecting the government's most comprehensive dataset on that region's habitats will remain docked this summer.

Some regulatory work has also slowed—government researchers have been unable to collect data at the same pace as before, and outside industry groups are submitting data at a slower rate—and at least one highly anticipated new regulation, on heavy-duty trucks, is significantly delayed as a result.

But the agency has also picked up new tasks during the outbreak, issuing new guidance to Americans on what cleaning products are effective at killing the coronavirus on surfaces.

While the Food and Drug Administration approves cleaning products used directly on people, such as hand sanitizer, the EPA approves products such as aerosols, kitchen counter cleaners and disinfectant wipes.

"At the beginning of March we had approved 40 products, and now we've approved over 450 products," Wheeler said. "Our guys are very creative, and created an app that people can download on their phones when they go to the store to make sure that the product they're buying is effective against coronavirus."

Despite the pandemic's impact on the agency, Wheeler has managed to deliver on a deregulatory agenda core to Trump's reelection strategy, announcing some of the EPA's most significant actions of his tenure during the height of the crisis.

The administration finalized a rule on fuel efficiency standards for cars after a belabored process that divided the auto industry and infuriated California's state government. And it helped the White House complete significant revisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, a cornerstone conservation law that protects communities against construction projects that could damage local environments.

The EPA's inspector general is now investigating whether agency leadership acted appropriately as it put together its final rule for tailpipe standards, and whether career EPA officials were sidelined. Wheeler rejected that notion and said he would fully cooperate with the probe.

"They were not shut out," he said. "The criticism is unfounded, and I'm sure that the IG will—it should be a fairly quick review by the IG. We followed the exact same procedures that have been followed by the agency in previous administrations, including the Obama administration."

He also pushed back against Democratic lawmakers who have roundly criticized the president's changes to NEPA, announced in a major event on the South Lawn of the White House.

"We actually provided in the NEPA regs for community involvement earlier in the process, which I think is very important," Wheeler said. "One thing that we did in this administration is take environmental justice out of the enforcement office and put it into the administrator's office, so that we could focus on environmental justice across the board and in everything. I don't think you should wait till the end. I don't think you should wait until enforcement actions to think about environmental justice."

The timing of such large policy announcements has raised red flags among environmentalist groups, which have accused Wheeler of

exploiting the pandemic crisis as cover for a dramatic series of environmental rollbacks.

As a former lobbyist for the coal industry and senior aide to Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., who once brought a snowball onto the Senate floor in 2015 as evidence against global warming, Wheeler is familiar with the criticism.

"People say I'm doing this for former clients. I have no financial interests with former clients. You know, at the end of the day, under our administration, air pollution has dropped 7%," Wheeler said.

While Wheeler has said he views climate change as a distant concern, 50 to 75 years down the line, he has acknowledged that the threat is real and that he is unable to identify its tipping point.

Nevertheless he remains a defender of fossil fuels—not only as a source of jobs but as a reliable source of energy in an unstable world.

Wheeler recalled as a child on the outskirts of Cincinnati in the 1970s being stuck at home for over a month, prevented by a polar vortex from attending school because natural gas pipelines were too cold to fuel the Ohio Valley.

The experience ingrained in Wheeler a lesson that has proven especially prescient during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Because of crises, you can't depend on any one energy source—you have to have multiple energy sources," Wheeler said. "I played poker for three weeks, and then did all my homework the last week before I went back to school. So you know, it's—we need nuclear. We need solar. We need wind. We need coal. We need natural gas. We need all of it."

That philosophy has found him a home in the Trump administration, which asserts that private sector innovation will be a more efficient method of combating climate change than government regulation.

"By reining in EPA overreach, my administration has returned the agency to its core mission of ensuring clean air, clean water, and a truly pristine natural environment," Trump said at the July 16 event on rolling back regulations. Wheeler was in attendance and was thanked for his work. "Our air now and our water is as clean as it's been in the last four decades," Trump said.

And the EPA administrator plans on sticking around.

"I'm not leaving yet. I'm still here for at least another two to three years," Wheeler said, in an expression of confidence in the president's prospects in the November election.

"The president has already asked me to start planning for a second-term agenda. So I'm taking that as he wants me to implement it," he said. "But I serve at the president's request. I am more than willing to serve in a second term if he would like me to stay."

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