

Trump administration is on track to cut 1 in 3 EPA staffers by the end of 2025, slashing agency's ability to keep pollution out of air and water

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Published: September 29, 2025 1:59pm EDT



Environmental Protection Agency staff and contractors are often involved in large cleanups of toxic waste, such as after the Los Angeles fires of early 2025.

Mario Tama/Getty Images

As Congress faces a Sept. 30, 2025, deadline to fund the federal government, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee Zeldin has put the EPA on the chopping block. But even before Congress decides about the administration's recommendations to slash its staff, the EPA's political leaders have made even more significant cuts to the agency's workforce.

And a look at past efforts to cut EPA staff shows how rapidly those changes can affect Americans' health and the environment.

Using publicly available government databases and a collection of in-depth interviews with current and former EPA employees, the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, a group of volunteer academics that we are a part of, has begun to put some numbers behind what many have suspected. Zeldin's cuts have diminished the EPA's staffing levels, even before Congress has had a chance to weigh in, affecting the environment, public health and government transparency.



EPA employees protest cuts to the agency.

Brett Phelps/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

How many people are being let go?

Precise numbers of staffing cuts are hard to pin down, but their historic scale in the first eight months of this administration is unmistakable. Released in May, Zeldin's budget proposal for the fiscal year starting October 2025 proposed to cut 1,274 full-time-equivalent employee positions from a total of 14,130 in the year ending Sept. 30, 2025 – a 9% drop.

A July 18, 2025, press release from the EPA said the agency had already cut 23% of its personnel, terminating the employment of 3,707 of 16,155 employees. Using employees – the number of people – rather than full-time equivalents makes these numbers difficult to compare directly with EPA's budget proposals.

Combining EPA data on staffing changes with conservative estimates of the pending cuts, the initiative has calculated that 25% of EPA staff are already out of the agency.

That calculation does not include other announced cuts, including a third round of deferred resignations taking effect at the end of September 2025 and December 2025. Those cuts may see the departure of similar numbers of full-time equivalents as in the past two rounds – approximately 500 and 1,500.

The agency has also reportedly planned to be cutting as much as two-thirds of research staff.

With those departure figures included, the initiative estimates that approximately 33% of staffers at the agency when Trump took office will be gone by the end of 2025. That would leave, at the start of 2026, an EPA staff numbering approximately 9,700 people, a level not seen since the last years of the Nixon and Ford administrations.

These cuts are deeper than past efforts to shrink the size of the agency. In his first term, Trump proposed eliminating 21.4% of staff at the EPA, though Congress made no significant changes to the agency's staffing. The largest actual cut to EPA staffing was under President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s: He advocated for a 17.3% drop in staffing, although Congress held the cuts to 10%.

Effects of past cuts

In the past, cuts to the EPA caused problems and were reversed – but it took years.

The staffing and budget cuts that came during the first two years of the Reagan administration generated problems with meeting the agency's responsibilities.

For instance, rather than prosecute industry for polluting, Reagan's EPA Administrator Anne Gorsuch told business leaders she would ignore their violations of environmental laws. Remaining staff were convinced that working on enforcement cases would be a "black mark" on their records.

Another top political appointee at Reagan's EPA, Rita Lavelle, who headed the Superfund effort to clean up toxic sites, faced prison time for her official acts. She was convicted of perjury and obstructing a congressional investigation because she lied about her ties to a former employer who had polluted the Stringfellow Acid Pits, a Superfund site near Riverside, California.



A man holds a jar of contaminated water from the stream flowing out of the Stringfellow Acid Pits in California in February 1983.

Bill Nation/Sygma via Getty Images

In the wake of the scandal, Lavelle was fired and Gorsuch and more than a dozen other political appointees resigned.

In a later report on the issue, Congress accused Gorsuch, Lavelle and others of poor job performance, noting that after four years of Superfund work, "only six of the 546 ... of the most hazardous sites in the Nation have been cleaned up." The Stringfellow site, a focus of the investigation, was "threatening the health and safety of 500,000 people," the report noted.

With anger over the scandals from both Americans and Congress, Reagan reversed course and spent the remaining six years of his presidency building the EPA back up in both staffing and budget. Staffing, for example, increased from a low of 10,481 full-time-equivalent employees in 1982 to 15,130 in 1989. Reagan's EPA budget, which had fallen to US\$4.1 billion in 1984, increased to \$4.9 billion in 1989.

The existing Trump cuts, and those proposed – if enacted by Congress – would be deeper than Reagan's, reducing the number of people doing important research on environmental harms and the health effects of dangerous chemicals; suing companies who pollute the environment; and overseeing the cleanup of toxic sites.

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Chris Sellers previously received funding from the National Science Foundation on a project that partly involved research into the EPA's history.

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