

The agency jettisons expert panels providing guidance on important health and environmental issues.

By Christopher S. Zarba

Mr. Zarba was the staff director of the Scientific Advisory Board at the Environmental Protection Agency until February.

Nov. 14, 2018

Last month, the Environmental Protection Agency effectively disbanded a scientific panel of experts on microscopic airborne pollutants that helped the agency figure out what level of pollutants are safe to breathe. The agency also dropped plans for a similar panel of experts to help assess another dangerous pollutant, ground-level ozone.

These decisions were the latest assaults on science at an agency that depends on science to protect Americans' health, safety and quality of life.

The disbanded panel on particulate pollution reported to the E.P.A.'s seven-member Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, which is responsible for advising the agency on overall air quality standards. Now, without the work of that panel, it is entirely likely that the advisory committee will lack the time and expertise to provide authoritative guidance on the regulation of this pollutant. The same can be said of ground-level ozone.

And that is no small matter. The E.P.A. itself says that numerous studies show that particulate pollution can lead to premature death in people with heart or lung disease, nonfatal heart attacks, irregular heartbeats, aggravated asthma and decreased lung function. Ground-level ozone can affect the breathing of people with asthma, children, older adults, and people who are active outdoors.

Sorting out the logic behind these new policies defies reason. The fact is that the agency's Scientific Advisory Board, which was created in 1978 at the direction of Congress to provide scientific advice to the administrator, has had extremely rigorous, issue-specific reviews free of conflicts of interest.

From what I saw, that approach was replaced by a closed-door process in which the agency's political appointees chose advocates for particular positions instead of seeking out impartial scientific expertise to help determine policies. By doing this, the administration has subverted the role of science in the agency's approach on issues.

This has fundamentally hobbled many years of legislative effort, by Republicans and Democrats alike, to protect human health and the environment. The cost will be borne by the American public.

This attack on science and its connection to E.P.A. decision-making reminds me of the desperation of the tobacco industry when it began to be clear that tobacco was dangerous. The industry tried to discredit and marginalize the science by maintaining that the health-effects data was inconclusive. Truth won out, but it was a hard-fought battle. Will we look back at actions the E.P.A. is making today with the same regret and disbelief as we do with tobacco regulation?

Independent, honest science is the backbone of environmental regulation. It also threatens people who want to hide the truth.

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