



By **Lisa Friedman**

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WASHINGTON — The Trump administration failed to follow ethics rules last year when it dismissed academic members of Environmental Protection Agency advisory boards and replaced them with appointees connected to industry, a federal watchdog agency concluded Monday.

The agency, the Government Accountability Office, found that the administration “did not consistently ensure” that appointees to E.P.A. advisory panels met federal ethics requirements. It also concluded that Trump administration officials violated E.P.A. guidelines by not basing the appointments on recommendations made by career staff members.

Scott Pruitt, President Trump’s first E.P.A. administrator who resigned last year amid ethics scandals, remade the agency’s science advisory panels because he said they did not fairly represent the United States geographically, or the industries affected by regulations.

The percentage of academic scientists serving on one E.P.A. panel, the Scientific Advisory Board, dropped 27 percent during the first year of the Trump administration. Academics on the agency’s Board of Scientific Counselors dropped 45 percent. Investigators found that the percentage of academics on E.P.A. advisory boards remained stable around 83 percent during the first year President Barack Obama was in office.

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“E.P.A. also did not consistently ensure that members appointed as special government employees — who are expected to provide their best judgment free from conflicts of interest and are required by federal regulations to disclose their financial interests — met federal ethics requirements,” the report said.

It also said the agency “did not follow a key step” in its own rules by failing to document the agency’s rationale for appointing new panel members. Under established procedures, agency staff members are expected to outline their decisions for recommending certain candidates.

“This report shows that the Trump administration rigged influential advisory boards to favor its polluter backers,” Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a Rhode Island Democrat, said in a statement. He called the findings “yet another example of Donald Trump handing the keys to Americans’ government to big industries that government is supposed to police.”

The House Science Committee is expected to raise the findings in a hearing Tuesday.

The E.P.A. denied violating guidelines. Michael Abboud, a spokesman for the E.P.A., noted in an email that challenges to the agency’s appointment decisions “have been dismissed in three separate district courts.” “Given the range of environmental and public health considerations across the country, E.P.A. is proud of the fact that its chartered scientific advisory committees have the highest participation of state, local, and tribal experts than at any point in the Agency’s history,” Mr. Abboud said.

The G.A.O. report found that Mr. Pruitt remade the panels geographically to include a 25 percent increase in members from the South, which the watchdog agency defined as spanning from Delaware to Texas.

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