



Major EPA reorganization will end science research program

BY MIRANDA GREEN - 02/26/18 08:49 PM EST

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A federal environmental program that distributes grants to test the effects of chemical exposure on adults and children is being shuttered amidst a major organization consolidation at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The National Center for Environmental Research (NCER) will no longer exist following plans to combine three EPA offices, the agency confirmed to The Hill Monday.

The program provides millions of dollars in grants each year.

Perhaps best known for its handling of fellowships that study the effects of chemicals on children's health, NCER will be dissolved and science staff serving there will be reassigned elsewhere within the department, EPA said.

The merger will involve EPA's Office of Administrative and Research Support, Office of Program Accountability and Resource Management, and the grants and contracts managed by NCER to create a new Office of Resource Management.

Other EPA functions consolidated into the new office include the handling of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, records management and budget formulation functions.

An EPA spokesperson said the extensive organizational changes are meant to create more efficiency within the agency.

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“EPA’s Office of Research and Development is one of the world’s leading environmental and human health research organizations. In order to maintain the quality and focus of our research, senior leaders from the research and development office are proactively taking steps to create management efficiencies within the organization,” the spokesperson said. “These changes will help EPA’s Office of Research and Development be more responsive to agency priorities and funding realities.”

Both of the White House’s fiscal 2018 and 2019 budgets proposed zeroing out major programs under NCER, but the cuts were not taken up in the most recent congressional budget.

An EPA spokesperson said that under the planned overhaul, employees currently working at NCER will not be fired, but may have their positions altered.

“At the appropriate time, the science staff currently in NCER will be redeployed to the ORD labs/centers/offices matching their expertise to organizational needs. This reorganization could result in a change of positions or functions. Staff in the affected organizations will retain the grade and career ladder of their position of record,” the spokesperson said.

NCER is largely known for the funding it provides through its premiere program, Science To Achieve Results (STAR). Under the STAR program, grants are given to the Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Centers, which were established in 1988 to discover methods to reduce children's health risks from environmental factors.

“Those programs have been so successful in advancing our scientific understanding and our ability to address the ways that environmental chemicals can impact children’s health,” said Tracey Woodruff, a former senior scientist and policy advisor at the EPA under the Clinton and Bush administrations. “The children centers were really the first and only centers to undercover the relationship with prenatal exposure to flame retardants and IQ deficiencies in children.”

A report released by the National Academy of Sciences last year that was compiled at EPA’s request, championed the STAR program for its “numerous successes.”

"STAR has had numerous successes, such as in research on human health implications of air pollution, on environmental effects on children’s health and well-being, on interactions between climate change and air quality, and on the human health implications of nanoparticles. Those are just a few examples; many more could be cited," [the report read](#).

Woodruff called the decision to merge NCER with the other offices, which currently do not focus on handling grants, extremely concerning.

“They make it sound like this is a way to create efficiency, but it masks what's happening to this actually programmatic, scientific function of NCER and the STAR program. That makes you think, 'Is this really just an efficiency argument masking their real intention to get rid of the research grant program, which they have said they want to do in the past?' she said. “Answering FOIAs and administering scientific grants are not the same thing.”

EPA has [recently acknowledged](#) a slow-down in the rate of FOIA requests answered, citing a backlog in previous requests made under the Obama

administration and an uptick in FOIA requests sent since [President Trump](#) took office.

The EPA official did not acknowledge how the agency rearrangement may address those issues.

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