



EPA employees who work on environmental justice are put on leave

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The majority of employees who work at the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights were put on administrative leave Thursday.

Stefani Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images

Nearly 170 employees at the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights (OEJECR) were placed on paid administrative leave on Thursday, according to agency officials speaking on the condition of anonymity because they fear retribution.

Many of the employees put on leave worked part-time or primarily on environmental justice efforts designed to reduce environmental harms to poor and minority communities that have, historically and at present, faced disproportionate harm from environmental and climate pollution.

President Trump has expressed interest in getting rid of the office altogether, along with other programs and offices across the federal government that deal with environmental justice. He signed [executive orders](#) on [his first day in office to set that process in motion](#).

Affected employees were informed of the decision during a meeting Thursday afternoon, after which they received an email alerting them they were on administrative leave, effective immediately. Dozens of staff based at EPA headquarters were affected, along with those from EPA's 10 regional offices around the country. NPR viewed the email and confirmed the reports with several sources within the office.

The number of staff put on leave is significant, relevant to the office's size, and "leaves the environmental justice program at EPA on life support," says Matthew Tejada, formerly deputy assistant administrator for OEJECR during the Biden administration. He is currently a senior environmental health specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In an email statement, EPA spokesperson Molly Vaseliou wrote that employees put on leave had jobs that did not relate to the agency's "statutory duties or grant work."

Vaseliou wrote that the agency "is in the process of evaluating new structure and organization to ensure we are meeting our mission of protecting human health and the environment for all Americans."

Sacoby Wilson, [an environmental justice expert at the University of Maryland](#), says despite employees being placed on administrative leave, the Trump administration can't erase the impact of the office of environmental justice.

"What's at stake here is public health," Wilson says. "What's at stake here is the future of our children to live in healthy environments. What's at stake here is our democracy, the rule of law, the American dream."

Environmental justice's growing EPA footprint—slashed

For many years, [environmental justice work at EPA](#) had been housed in the small Office of Environmental Justice, staffed by a few dozen people. That office, [under a different name](#), was established in 1992 by Republican president George H. W. Bush.

Environmental justice efforts gained federal support in subsequent years. President Bill Clinton issued a 1994 executive order requiring federal agencies to consider environmental justice in decision-making; efforts continued during the Obama administration. Then, the Biden administration made environmental justice an even more explicit focus. It initiated the Justice40 initiative, intended to direct [40% of federal climate and environmental benefits](#) toward communities that had historically been subjected to the worst pollution.

In 2022, EPA [merged the Office of Environmental Justice with two others to create OEJECR](#). By 2024, it had increased staff both at EPA headquarters and in EPA's 10 regional offices across the country to more than 200.

"It was small but super mighty," says Wilson. "People were super committed, and they were committed because they were part of a movement. It was something bigger than themselves."

The office now oversees and administers over \$3 billion in grants and loans related to climate and environmental justice, largely funded through the country's first major climate policy, the Inflation Reduction Act. Funded projects addressed a wide range of environmental and climate risks.

"Communities were asking for money to take their churches, their schools, their libraries, and turn them into centers where communities could shelter and receive medical care and have access to communications and have access to battery-stored electricity" during disasters, Tejada says. "Tribes were asking for solar arrays to both power their rural communities and give them some resilience and some relief from energy prices."

The office approved and signed contracts for hundreds of community-led projects like

those, adding up to over 80% of the funds directed toward the office's programs, according to [Zealan Hoover](#), former senior advisor to the EPA administrator. The future of those projects is unclear, though, after the Trump administration [froze federal grant funding and other programs in late January](#).

"The obligation to provide grantees with good standing to access to their funds is crystal clear," Hoover says.

NPR reached out to the White House for comment but had not received a response by the time of publication.

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