

Sierra Club warns: 'Biggest assault on the EPA in history'

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Carl Pope (Image courtesy of the Sierra Club)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has emerged as a punching bag for members of the Republican-led House of Representatives. The House wants to slash the agency's budget and some conservative lawmakers even want to abolish it.

The politicians and some businesses say environmental regulation is stifling the country's economy. Ngoc Nguyen with New America Media recently interviewed Carl Pope, executive chairman of the Sierra Club, about what's behind the attack on the EPA. Following is their conversation.

NAM: What's happening with current efforts to undermine the EPA that people should be aware of?

Pope: The big picture is, during the eight years of the [George W.] Bush administration, it effectively suspended enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act. [The administration] stopped enforcing them and tried to basically repeal them to rewrite the rules in a way that wouldn't do what Congress intended. The courts without exception rejected the efforts by the Bush administration.

When the Obama administration came in...it started enforcing laws that had been on the books since the 1990s. [It said], 'You have to comply with the law, protect people from mercury, soot and smog. We don't want kids getting asthma. Most fisheries have levels of mercury that are not safe for young women to eat. Clean up your act.'

We are now seeing a backlash, not from the business community as a whole, but just a small segment of the dirtiest businesses, who don't want to live by the same standards as everyone else. The oil and coal industry and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—they are leading the charge.

Sierra Club head warns: Climate change backlash has triggered efforts in Congress to stifle the EPA's powers?

[Visit the EPA Colorado blog] completely. We have in the House of Representatives, a reactionary faction of the Republican caucus opposing amendments, saying we're not going to enforce clean water laws in Florida [or] require companies to treat coal ash, which contains mercury, cadmium and lead, before disposing of it. We're seeing the biggest single assault on the EPA in U.S. history.

What EPA rules, on the horizon, are the most contentious among some businesses and conservative lawmakers?

Among the most contentious are regulations to clean up mercury and acid gases from cement kilns. These are very toxic chemicals, and there are currently no regulations to limit them, and they're the ones the Tea Party is going after. There are other regulations that are pending that would regulate the amount of mercury, soot and carbon that comes out of power plants.

What's at stake for low-income and ethnic communities with regard to efforts to undermine the EPA's regulatory power?

Very often, people in ethnic communities live near outmoded, dirty industrial facilities. Their asthma rates are the highest, and those communities often bear the brunt of not cleaning up these facilities. Living downwind from a coal ash pile is equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. For example, in Nevada, the Shoshone Indians live near a coal ash pile near the Reid Gardner power plant, and in the San Joaquin Valley, where there are heavy concentrations of pollution, ethnic communities are at the front lines. They will get sick and die.

Is support for the EPA among the public strong?

Polling shows that the American people have a very positive opinion of the EPA. They want their air clean and their water clean, and they don't think politicians should interfere with it. [The strong public support] will make a huge difference, and [it is] part of the reason Obama and the Senate are being so firm [in supporting the EPA].

The bad economy doesn't appear to have dampened public support for the EPA or the environment, but there's a perception that regulation causes job losses. Is that what's happening?

If you build a new power plant, you have a lot more jobs. If you take a refinery, and let it run dirty, you don't need as many maintenance [workers], so cleaning up the refinery increases the workforce. Cleaning up pollution creates jobs; it doesn't cost jobs, and we've proved that over and over again.

As national legislation to tackle climate change has gone nowhere, the EPA is now at the center of efforts to regulate greenhouse gases that cause global warming as well. Why?

A huge amount of carbon pollution comes from burning coal, and coal is mostly burned in outmoded power plants that also release sulfur, mercury, soot, nitrogen and coal ash. It turns out that the coal industry and allies of the coal industry, they don't want to clean up carbon pollution or any pollution.

The plants are old and outmoded, so cleaning them up is good for public health, good for people who live close to the plant, and good for the climatic future. The solution to carbon pollution is the solution to the climate problem, and the EPA is on the front lines of both those battles.

[To see the original posting of this interview, see New America Media's story: [Sierra Club Head Warns: "Biggest Assault on the EPA in U.S. History"](#) [3].]

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