

EPA staff braces for Friday reorganization announcement

By Ellie Borst, Miranda Willson, Sean Reilly | 05/01/2025 04:32 PM EDT

Employees in the agency's chemicals and research offices have been told officials will share information on the shake-up and restructuring plans.

Political leadership at EPA has told employees with at least two program offices to expect reorganization announcements Friday.

According to multiple people with knowledge of senior-level meetings, EPA has scheduled an all-hands meeting late Friday with Office of Research and Development employees.

There, agency leaders are expected to inform staff that some functions will be restructured or absorbed into other offices, but ORD will no longer exist as a stand-alone program, said one source with knowledge of the plan and granted anonymity to speak due to fear of retaliation.

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American Federation of Government Employees Council 238, a union representing EPA employees, has been invited to attend the 4:30 meeting, said union President Marie Owens Powell. The union has not received information on why the meeting was scheduled or what it is about, Powell said.

EPA spokesperson Molly Vaseliou said no decisions had been made about the Office of Research and Development and stressed that all-hands meetings are “normal occurrences” across the agency.

“[In] fact, E&E News already reported on this same exact topic months ago because of a separate unrelated all hands meeting within the Office of Research and Development,” Vaseliou said in an email. “It wasn’t true then and it’s not true now. EPA is taking exciting steps as we enter the next phase of organizational improvements.”

Meanwhile, Kyla Bennett, director of science policy at Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, said she expected a reorganization plan for the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention to be released by the close of business Friday.

Another source with knowledge of the chemicals office plan, granted anonymity, confirmed plans are expected by Friday.

Chris Frey, who led the Office of Research and Development for most of the Biden administration, said the employees he knows there do not seem to know what Friday’s meeting will cover.

“The fact that this is secretive is indicative of the whole lack of process and collaboration and information sharing,” Frey said. “I guess we’ll know tomorrow when the powers that be decide to share it with everyone.”

Fear for the future of ORD, whose approximately 1,500 employees play key supporting roles through the agency, has mounted since Democrats on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee in March released an EPA draft that called for eliminating the office and laying off up to three-quarters of its staff.

Last month, [Frey and five other former EPA research chiefs](#) extolled the office’s value to Senate appropriators in a tacit bid for them to ensure ORD’s survival. The office has helped the agency respond to drinking water crises, assesses the health effects of chemicals and assists states on local environmental challenges.

“The diminishment or loss of this national asset would degrade the ability of the United States to be prepared for the future and responsive to myriad challenges that lay before us,” Frey and other former officials wrote.

Like other federal agencies, EPA had to recently submit a plan to the White House Office of Management and Budget and Office of Personnel Management that outlined areas for “large scale” reductions in force, a government term for layoffs.

Soliciting resignations and input on cuts

Amid fears of deep workforce cuts, more than 8,000 employees — or roughly half of the agency’s workforce — turned out Wednesday for a webinar on a recently reupped incentive to encourage employees to leave voluntarily.

Staffers who sign up for the “deferred resignation” program will go on paid leave through the end of September. Under [a deadline set last week](#) by Administrator Lee Zeldin’s office, employees have until Monday to sign up.

This is the second time the option has been offered since President Donald Trump began his second term. About 545 workers took advantage of it in the first round, according to EPA.

During the Wednesday webinar, it became clear “that many EPA scientists and engineers view the atmosphere at EPA as toxic and are looking for a way out,” Nicole Cantello, the head of an AFGE local, said in a Thursday text message to POLITICO’s E&E News. “This does not bode well for the safety of Americans’ air, water and soil.”

The agency is also dangling an early retirement incentive. For those who accept either of the “early out” offers, Vaseliou said, “we thank you for your service at the EPA and wish you well in your endeavors.”

The Friday announcements coincide with Zeldin trying to reduce spending and soliciting suggestions from staff about how to do so. He has said he will cut agency spending by 65 percent this year, including potentially by canceling grants to cities, states and nonprofits and eliminating positions that he says are not directly tied to federal statutes.

In an email sent to EPA staff Thursday morning, Zeldin praised employees' "hard work and dedication" and reiterated his desire to "reduce costs while maintaining our effectiveness."

"I believe many of the best ideas come from those who see firsthand where the agency can operate more efficiently," Zeldin wrote in the email. "That's why I'm asking for your help. We're asking for your ideas — big or small — to make improvements to the agency."

The email includes a link to an "employee ideas form" for staff. "Your input makes a real difference. I want to hear from you because I value your experience and insight," the email continued.

One career staffer granted anonymity for fear of retribution said he was surprised by the email in light of the agency's firing of hundreds of staffers working on environmental justice and the wave of resignations that have hit the agency.

"I don't know what they are expecting to get after completely eroding trust between leadership and workers," the staffer said in a written message.

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