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US EPA sends second 'fork in the road' email offering buyouts

CHEMICAL WATCH NEWS

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Workforce departures could slow work in chemical and science offices, say former staff

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The US EPA has offered a second round of voluntary exit packages to staff across multiple agency departments.

Many employees, facing uncertainty about their roles, may take the offer, current and former EPA staff told Chemical Watch News & Insight.

If enough staff decide to leave, the departures could slow key work, including TSCA chemical reviews and regulation.

"It has the potential to lead to less efficiency, greater delays and more lawsuits defended and paid out by American taxpayer dollars," said Allison Payne, a former EPA counsel who is now an associate at law firm Keller and Heckman.



An all-staff email sent on 28 April outlined the terms for deferred resignations and voluntary early retirements. Employees have one week to decide whether to take the offer.

"The whispers in the hallway are [that] there are a lot of folks who will take it - or are strongly considering taking it," said Holly Wilson, president of the local American Federation of Government Employees union, which represents about 1,000 workers at the EPA's Research Triangle Park office in North Carolina.

Wilson and former staff pointed to an unprecedented climate of uncertainty and a lack of clear communication between new leadership and senior career staff (see box).

Traditionally, Wilson said, federal jobs had a clear brand: "You have job security, you have great benefits, you have a mission you can be proud of."

Recent actions by the administration have led to "a breach of trust that's been held for decades", she said.

Payne added that many staff may take the latest buyout offer as they see it as a sign that more layoffs are imminent.

Potential slowdown for chemical approvals

While EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has made speeding up new chemical approvals a [priority](#), current and former staff said the buyouts could complicate that goal - even if the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention (OCSPP) is spared in future layoffs.

More than one third of the OCSPP's division directors have already left since the start of the Trump administration's latest term.

Tala Henry, a retired deputy director of the Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics, said it "should be obvious that a massive brain drain all at once can only be detrimental to the agency's mission".

Payne said the loss of expertise and capacity will hurt industry.

"Any benefits to industry from deregulation could be countered by even longer wait times caused by staffing shortages, particularly as it relates to new chemicals and registration or registration review of pesticides," she said.

Pattern of attrition

The administration's attrition-oriented policies could also make it difficult to replace departing staff.

A recent [executive order](#) allows the EPA and other agencies only one new hire for every four who depart. It is not yet clear if employees who depart through buyouts and layoffs count towards that total.

A recent [proposal](#) from the Office of Management and Budget could reclassify many remaining senior career staff, including scientists, as political appointees, eroding their job security and increasing their vulnerability to political influence.

As a result, Wilson said, "I think we are going to have a hard time attracting the best and the brightest to the federal government."

Staff cuts to date

Hundreds of EPA staff have already been cut through previous [buyouts and layoffs](#), including 280 environmental justice workers fired last week on the eve of Earth Day.

Scientists across the agency are also scrambling to wrap up long-term projects in case their roles are cut, Wilson said.

Another 400 remote staff around the country were recently given two weeks to either transfer to an in-person EPA office or take a buyout, according to an email viewed by Chemical Watch News & Insight.

Other EPA employees are already back in offices - including those accustomed to working in the field or from home with relative autonomy - with staff now being monitored to confirm their whereabouts.

Overall, the office environment is chaotic and stressful, Wilson said.

"Protecting human health and the environment shouldn't be a partisan issue," Wilson said. "When [the EPA] loses dedicated staff who have come here for their dream jobs, who are highly specialised and sought after in their field, they lose a lot."



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Suggested Baselines

General Industry Safety Orders (8 CCR Div. 1, Ch. 4, Subch. 7)

28 March 2025

Swedish Work Environment Authority Regulations (AFS 2020:1) on Workplace Design

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Standards on Exposure Limits at Workplaces

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Companies with employees exposed or likely exposed to hazardous substances must comply with more stringent safety control measures regarding operations involving these substances

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