

US environmental regulatory official forced out after dispute with Dow Chemical

Naomi Spencer
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A regional US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator in a long-running fight with Dow Chemical over pollution announced her resignation May 1, after high-ranking federal officials stripped her of her enforcement powers and told her to quit or be fired by June 1. The ouster is the latest example of the Bush administration's political interference into science and regulation at the EPA on behalf of big business.

The administrator, Mary Gade, headed the EPA's Region 5 office in Chicago, which oversees federal enforcement throughout Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Since she was appointed by Bush to the Midwest office in 2006, Gade had pressed for clean-up efforts and pursued penalties against Dow for dioxin contamination surrounding its Midland, Michigan plants.

For decades, Dow has dumped dioxin—a highly toxic byproduct of herbicides and chlorinated chemicals—into local rivers, contaminating fish and wildlife and saturating the water and soil within 50 miles of its plants. Dioxin is known to cause cancer, mutations, and serious skin diseases. The EPA considers the chemical dangerous to public health and the environment even at very low levels because it bioaccumulates, or builds up in the environment and in the body much faster than it breaks down.

Last July, Gade invoked emergency powers to order Dow to immediately clean up three so-called “hotspots” of dioxin near its factories. At one test site near a park in Saginaw, Michigan in November, the EPA found dioxin levels of a staggering 1.6 million parts per trillion. The federal EPA limit for dioxin is 1,000 parts per trillion; Michigan's state Department of Environmental Quality limit is only 90 parts per trillion. The chemical is measured in trillionths both

because of its toxicity and its bioaccumulative property.

In November 2006, a survey by the University of Michigan identified three areas within a six-mile stretch of the Saginaw-area Tittabawassee River with extremely high dioxin concentrations in the soil. The levels measured from 69,000 to 87,000 parts per trillion. The company insisted that the depth of dioxin in the soil—between 6 inches to a foot down—indicated that the contamination occurred at least a century ago and had nothing to do with Dow's own dumping. Michigan's average dioxin level statewide is only 7 parts per trillion.

Dow has continually insisted that its dioxin pollution is harmless to people and wildlife. Company spokesperson John Musser told the *Chicago Tribune* May 2, “There is all this mystique about dioxin. Just because it's there doesn't mean there is an imminent health threat.” To the *Washington Post* on May 3, Musser claimed company-commissioned research showed that dioxin in soil “is not a contributor in any meaningful way to levels of contaminants in people's bodies. Both on human health and environmental side, there's not an imminent public health threat.”

Dow sought to cut a deal on the clean up with the EPA late last year that would have extended the deadline until at least 2010. According to the May 2 *Tribune* report, Gade broke off negotiations in January on the grounds that Dow was “refusing to take action necessary to protect public health and wildlife.” In turn, “Dow responded by appealing to officials in Washington,” according to “heavily redacted letters” obtained by the *Tribune* through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The *Tribune* reported that two aides to federal EPA administrator Stephen Johnson gave Gade the ultimatum of quit or be fired. Gade told the paper on

Thursday, “There’s no question this is about Dow. I stand behind what I did and what my staff did. I’m proud of what we did.”

EPA head Johnson has on multiple occasions interfered with the basic mandates of the agency to protect public health since his appointment in 2005. In December, Johnson quashed a California initiative that would have imposed limits on greenhouse gas emissions from automobile exhaust. He has declined to declare such emissions a public health concern despite broad consensus within the EPA on the dangers posed by global warming.

EPA scientists have complained about similar political meddling over the past five years. A survey of EPA staff scientists by the Union of Concerned Scientists, released April 23, found that the agency was “under siege from political pressures.” According to the UCS findings, Bush appointees “have edited scientific documents, manipulated scientific assessments, and generally sought to undermine the science behind dozens of EPA regulations.”

Of 1,600 respondents, 889 scientists (60 percent) reported that they had personally experienced at least one incident of political interference during the past five years. A fifth of respondents said their work had been subjected to changes that altered the meaning of the scientific findings, and a fifth of scientists reported experiencing “selective or incomplete use of data to justify a specific regulatory outcome.”

Nearly 200 EPA scientists said they had personally experienced “situations in which scientists have actively objected to, resigned from, or removed themselves from a project because of pressure to change scientific findings.” More than 40 percent of the respondents said they had seen cases in which “commercial interests have inappropriately induced the reversal or withdrawal of EPA scientific conclusions or decisions through political intervention.”

The UCS noted that nearly 100 scientists specifically identified the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the primary source of external interference at the EPA.

In 2004, the agency’s scientific risk assessment process for toxic chemicals such as dioxin, called the Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS), was put under the authority of the OMB. The EPA conducted only two risk assessments for all of fiscal years 2006

and 2007. In addition, according to an internal government audit, five IRIS assessments were aborted without explanation.



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