

Federal employees resist administration attempts to impose media gags

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Orders given last week by top officials at various federal agencies—including the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Parks Service, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services—have caused confusion and concern among a number of the employees and scientists that work for these departments.

The Monday after Trump's inauguration, the new administration imposed a freeze on new contracts and grants given by the EPA, \$4 billion which funds research, redevelopment of industrial sites, outreach, water and air quality, according to Reuters. A media gag order was simultaneously put in place, with employees being told to halt all forms of external communications, including press releases, social media, blogs, list serves, webinars, speaking engagements and updates to the EPA website.

One EPA employee, who spoke to the non-profit investigative publication ProPublica anonymously, said that the hiring freeze wasn't uncommon during a presidential transition, but that a freeze on grants and contracts seemed extraordinary. The employee also said that the freeze appeared to be nationwide.

Other agencies were given similar instructions. Employees at the Department of Health and Human Services were told not to send "any correspondence to public officials," including members of Congress. A memo sent to employees at the Department of Agriculture stated that all communications with the media and social media posts had to be reviewed by the new administration. Officials at the Department of the Interior ordered the National Parks Service to halt posting on their social media accounts.

The next day, the Trump administration ordered the EPA's communication team to remove the agency's climate change web page. This includes information on the causes of global warming, an overview of greenhouse gases and projected trends of climate change. The site

also includes a compilation of peer-reviewed climate research and a variety of detailed environmental data. This would be similar to what has already occurred on the White House web site, which had all references to climate change deleted minutes into the Trump presidency.

This immediately prompted climate scientists and computer experts outside the government to copy, archive and mirror all the data on the EPA's web site. The goal is to ensure that the data remains publicly available.

There was a backlash to these repressive measures among government employees and scientists. The departments initially hit by the media gags regularly discuss the impacts of climate change in their respective fields. The moves at the EPA in particular have sparked worry that the Trump administration is going to follow through with the pro-corporate policies that have been put forward by Trump EPA transition team leader Myron Ebell, who has stated he wants to cut 5,000 of the agency's employees and halve its budget.

Their fear is not unfounded. There have already been two executive orders which reduce the EPA's ability to provide environmental oversight on new infrastructure and manufacturing projects and another mandating that for every new government regulation, two old ones must be abolished. Moreover, Trump's pick for EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, filed numerous lawsuits against the agency while he was Oklahoma state attorney general, and has in the past fervently argued for the deregulation of greenhouse gases in order to aid the coal, oil and gas industries.

One of the few widely publicized employee reactions came from the Badlands National Park Twitter account, which posted three tweets on different aspects of climate change. While the tweets were soon deleted, other national parks, including Golden Gate National Park and Redwood National Park, soon followed suit, posting more of the science behind global warming.

Death Valley National Park tweeted a more political post, a photo of a Japanese-American interned during World War II as the news spread that Trump was going to sign executive orders withholding visas and blocking refugees from mostly Muslim countries.

This also prompted the creation of “alternative” or “rogue” government Twitter accounts, including for the National Parks Service, the EPA, the USDA, and the Department of Health and Human Services, each claiming to be the “unofficial resistance” accounts of employees opposed to the Trump administration. Over the course of the next few days, dozens of such accounts have appeared and have begun posting tweets in opposition to the new government’s policies. At first, the accounts all claimed to be run by an employee of the given department, but now many have posted that government employees no longer run them, likely to prevent any violations of the Hatch Act (legislation which prohibits federal employees from engaging in political activity while working).

Alongside the growth of the “rogue” social media accounts, a “March for Science,” tentatively scheduled for April 22, has been called in opposition to the Trump administration’s policies. It is loosely based on the various protests that occurred during and immediately after Trump’s inauguration, in this a case a protest against the rejection of a variety of scientific facts by different members of the new administration.

In the meantime, some of the new administration’s repressive measures have been relaxed. On January 25, the EPA suspended plans to remove climate change from its web site and the National Parks Service resumed posting on social media. A memo was sent to employees at the US Department of Agriculture stating that the previous email, telling employees to halt outside communications, “should not have happened.” Lastly, the freeze on EPA grants was lifted last Friday and there are no reported contract delays resulting from the temporary freeze.



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