

EPA chief resigns amid ethics scandals

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Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief Scott Pruitt resigned July 6, after months of scandal surrounding his behavior. In his resignation letter, Pruitt cited the numerous investigations into his supervision of the environmental agency as “unrelenting attacks.”

Pruitt is the subject of more than a dozen inquiries or reviews into his practices at the agency. The former EPA head is not being forced out of office due to popular opposition to his deregulatory policies, but because his personal corruption was seen as an obstacle to the pro-corporate rampage within the EPA.

Pruitt has faced various criticisms, including his first-class plane travel, the lease of a room at a condo linked to a Canadian energy company’s lobbying firm, and the installation of a \$43,000 soundproof booth in his office. He has also been accused of demoting or reassigning at least four high-ranking officials at the EPA for questioning his spending and management.

The former administrator’s lavish spending even drew objections from right-wing elements such as Fox News and talk show host Laura Ingraham, who tweeted on Tuesday: “Pruitt Is the Swamp. Drain It.”

His excesses included a trip arranged by a lobbyist to Morocco, a 24-hour security detail, and frequent weekend trips to Oklahoma, where he was state attorney general before Trump named him to his cabinet. A former EPA staff member told Congress that Pruitt often asked employees to “find him something to do” in Oklahoma to justify his use of federal funds to go there.

Pruitt has also been accused of violating anti-lobbyist laws and nepotism on multiple occasions. Pruitt used at least four different email accounts, and a review of EPA emails indicated close ties between the agency head and lobbyists. At one point, a family member of a lobbyist was being considered for a position at the EPA. In May 2017, Pruitt attempted to meet with the

chief executive of the restaurant chain Chick-fil-A to secure an opportunity for his wife to open her own franchise.

Both the EPA inspector general and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) are reviewing an April 2017 meeting that Pruitt held with the National Mining Association regarding the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

Pruitt embodied the Trump Administration’s broad support for the fossil fuel industry and its disdain for climate science. He built his career as Oklahoma’s top legal official on lawsuits against the EPA, the agency Trump appointed him to run. He oversaw the EPA’s largest pullback on environmental regulations in its history, including rules on climate change, automobile pollution standards, and other industrial pollutants. Pruitt was also a major supporter of the administration’s decision to withdraw from the Paris climate change agreement in June 2017.

Congressional Democrats and their media allies focused their attacks on Pruitt on his personal corruption, which was relatively small potatoes compared to the billions reaped by corporate interests freed from anti-pollution rules, and the thousands of lives sacrificed to boost those profits. The Democrats rarely discussed the actual substance of the EPA’s policy rollback, since many congressional Democrats have cozy ties with the same corporate polluters.

Eventually, Pruitt’s stench has become too much even for the Trump administration.

Since Trump’s inauguration, 33 high-ranking officials have either been forced out or fired from White House and cabinet positions. This is not only indicative of the instability of the Trump administration, but also the crisis of American democracy.

The grim truth is that nothing is likely to change at the EPA with Pruitt’s removal. He is being replaced for

now by his chief deputy Andrew Wheeler, who has represented the interests of some of the largest fossil fuel companies in the U.S. as a consultant and lobbyist since 2009.

He has lobbied for, among others, Energy Fuels Resources Inc., a major uranium mining company, the coal company Murray Energy, and a refrigerant manufacturer. Energy Fuels Resources Inc. hired Wheeler to lobby Congress to shrink Bears Ears National Monument, which is adjacent to one of the company's uranium processing mills. For ICOR International, the refrigerant manufacturer, he lobbied Congress and the EPA for less stringent ozone regulations.

Wheeler exhibits just as much disdain for climate change as others in the Trump Administration. Pruitt's resignation only serves to remove a distraction for the administration, and energy corporations, allowing it to continue its orgy of environmental deregulation.



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