

EPA Exposed for Hiding Chemical Risks, Favoring Corporate Interests

By [Carey Gillam](#)

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has a long and well-documented history of questionable conduct when it comes to regulation of chemicals important to the profit centers for many large and powerful corporations. Numerous examples show a pattern of agency actions that allow for the use of dangerous chemicals by consumers, farmers, groundskeepers and others despite evidence of harm.

Documents and other evidence, including information provided in public disclosures by multiple EPA scientists, reveals actions in which EPA managers have intentionally covered up risks associated with certain chemicals. According to the evidence from these EPA insiders, pressure from chemical manufacturers, chemical industry lobbyists and from certain U.S. lawmakers drives internal agency manipulations that protect corporate interests but endanger public health.

Evidence indicates the misconduct dates back decades and has occurred in administrations led by Democrats and Republican alike.

A [research project](#) sponsored by Harvard University’s Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics said while the EPA has “many dedicated employees who truly believe in its mission,” the agency has been “corrupted by numerous routine practices,” including a “revolving door” between EPA and industry in which corporate lawyers and lobbyists gain positions of agency power; constant industry lobbying against environmental regulations; pressure from lawmakers who are beholden to donors; and meddling by the White House.

Background: Blowing the whistle

The Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21 Century Act, signed into law on June 22, 2016, was the first substantive reform to Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). The law requires EPA to make an affirmative determination on whether a new chemical substance presents an “unreasonable risk” to human health or the environment under “known, intended or reasonably foreseen conditions of use.” See [information here](#).

Despite the law, the EPA has failed to make valid determinations about the risk presented by numerous chemicals.

In June 2021, four EPA scientists, each working within the agency's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention (OCSPP), publicly accused the the EPA of deliberate tampering with chemical risk assessments. The four whistleblowers made their complaints public through a group called Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

In [a June 28 letter](#) to the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, PEER said the four EPA scientists were providing "disturbing evidence of fraud and corruption," involving "deliberate tampering with chemical risk assessments conducted under the Toxics Substances Control Act (TSCA), including PFAS (a.k.a. "forever chemicals"), and the deletion of potential health effects without the knowledge or consent of the human health assessors."

The letter further states:

"All four clients have experienced numerous instances where their risk assessments were changed by their managers or by colleagues in response to direction by management. These changes include -

- Deleting language identifying potential adverse effects, including developmental toxicity, neurotoxicity, mutagenicity, and/or carcinogenicity;
- Major revisions that alter the report conclusions to indicate that there are no toxicity concerns despite data to the contrary; and
- Risk assessments being reassigned to inexperienced employees in order to secure their agreement to remove issues whose inclusion would be protective of human health."

As a result of the manipulations, people who work with these chemicals are not receiving information they need to protect themselves, such as "proper handling procedures, personal protection needed, accidental release measures, and first aid and firefighting measures," according to PEER.

This is a particular concern for pregnant women, according to the PEER complaint.

Erasing important information

On August 26, 2021, PEER filed a [separate complaint alleging](#) that the EPA has been breaking the law by erasing original versions of internal communications and draft documents and retaining only the final version of key documents. The practice violates the Federal Records Act by eliminating details of the decision-making process from outside review, according to PEER.

[PEER states](#) that that discarding of documents trails is not only contrary to law but also violates the EPA's own records retention policy. According to PEER, its complaint focuses on two classes of documents:

- Alterations of chemical risk assessments by managers in which both the identity of the manager and the alterations themselves are not apparent; and

- Internal comments related to the development of its Waters of the United States (WOTUS) rule, in which EPA software overwrote the original and all prior versions any time there was an edit. Thus, only the “final” version was saved.

“It is as if EPA memorializes its internal decision-making in disappearing ink,” PEER Executive Director Tim Whitehouse, a former EPA enforcement attorney, said in a press release. “EPA’s record-keeping practices allow unknown officials to make changes while disguising what precisely was changed and who changed them.”

PEER said it has asked the National Archives and Records Administration to intervene to prevent the EPA from destroying more records and to adopt safeguards to prevent any recurrences.

The case of Ruth Etzel

Ruth Etzel, former director of the EPA’s [Office of Children’s Health Protection \(OCHP\)](#), filed a [whistleblower complaint](#) with the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board contending she was subject to illegal retaliation in 2018 and 2019. Etzel said the agency retaliated against her after she complained publicly about what she said was EPA resistance to stronger public protections against lead poisoning.

At the EPA it was Etzel’s job to determine the impacts of regulations on children. But she alleges she was improperly removed from her position after speaking out about EPA failures, and was assigned to a division where she was not allowed to work on prevention of lead poisoning.

Etzel is both a pediatrician and an epidemiologist and is recognized internationally as an expert on child health and the environment. She was named the 2021 winner of the Public Policy and Advocacy Award by the Academic Pediatric Association.

More than [120 environmental and health organizations](#) complained to EPA about Etzel’s removal, saying the agency was sending a “signal that children’s health is not a priority for the agency.”

Reporting on EPA’s misconduct

See here information, including news articles, regarding alleged EPA misconduct and regulatory failures:

[New evidence of corruption at EPA chemicals division](#), by Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, September 18, 2021

[EPA whistleblower testifies her advocacy for stronger health protections drew agency retaliation](#), by Carey Gillam, USRTK, September 13, 2021

[‘The harm to children is irreparable’: Ruth Etzel speaks out ahead of EPA whistleblower hearing](#), Carey Gillam, The Guardian, September 12, 2021

[The EPA’s rationale for banning chlorpyrifos may make it harder to eliminate other brain-harming pesticides](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, August 24, 2021.

[Formaldehyde causes leukemia, according to EPA assessment suppressed by Trump](#)

[officials](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, August 19, 2021.

[EPA exposed: Leaked audio shows pressure to overrule scientists in “hair-on-hire” cases](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, August 4, 2021.

[Whistleblowers expose corruption in EPA chemical safety office](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, July 2, 2021.

[How pesticide companies corrupted the EPA and poisoned America](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, June 30, 2021.

[Flawed analysis of an intentional human dosing study and its impact on chlorpyrifos risk assessment](#), Lianne Sheppard, Seth McGrew, Richard Fenske, Environment International, July 2020.

[Further Efforts Needed to Uphold Scientific Integrity Policy at EPA](#), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General, May 20, 2020.

[EPA Allowed Companies to Make 40 New PFAS Chemicals Despite Serious Risks](#), Sharon Lerner, The Intercept, September 19, 2019.

[E.P.A. Won't Ban Chlorpyrifos, Pesticide Tied to Children's Health Problems](#), Lisa Friedman, New York Times, July 18, 2019.

[Emails show Trump EPA overruled career staff on Wisconsin air pollution](#), Timothy Gardner, Reuters, May 28, 2019.

[US environment agency cuts funding for kids' health studies](#), Sara Reardon, Nature, May 13, 2019.

[Meet 3 women who stood up to Trump to protect the American people — and lost their jobs](#), The Hill, January 19, 2019.

[White House, EPA headed off chemical pollution study](#), Annie Snider, Politico, May 14, 2018.

[Whitewash: The Story of a Weed Killer, Cancer, and the Corruption of Science](#), Carey Gillam, Island Press, October 10, 2017.

[Records Show EPA Efforts to Slow Herbicide Review Came in Coordination with Monsanto](#), Carey Gillam, Huffington Post, August 18, 2017.

[EPA Official Accused of Helping Monsanto “Kill” Cancer Study](#), Joel Rosenblatt, Lydia Mulvany, and Peter Waldman, Bloomberg, March 14, 2017.

[Poison Spring- The Secret History of Pollution and the EPA](#), Evaggelos Vallianatos and McKay Jenkins, Bloomsbury Press, April 14, 2014.

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