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USA TODAY

Scott Pruitt On A Mission To Change The Culture Of The EPA

Ledyard King

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/11/26/scott-pruitt-mission-change-culture-epa/889633001/>

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt isn't just dismantling the Clean Power Plan and other high-profile environmental programs of the Obama era. He's on a mission to re-engineer the agency's culture by returning power to states and away from the Washington bureaucrats and coastal elites he said have led it astray.

The EPA, for example, is doing away with the "sue-and-settle" approach that Pruitt said improperly allowed the Obama administration to circumvent laws by rewriting regulations behind closed doors with friendly environmental groups who filed lawsuits.

The agency also has rewritten membership rules for the agency's advisory boards, so that both industry advocates and academics from Midwestern and Mountain states — which Pruitt said were under-represented — have greater influence when counseling agency leaders on new rules.

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Ken Cuccinelli, a Pruitt ally and former Republican attorney general from Virginia, said the EPA administrator rightly believes the agency needs to return to its roots and abandon quixotic pursuits Obama conducted on global warming embodied by the Clean Power Plan and the decision to sign on to the international treaty known as the Paris Accord.

"The previous administration weaponized this agency," Cuccinelli said. "They were assaulting America through the EPA. Scott believes in clean water and clean air. There's never been any doubt about that. But all of the other creative stuff is the kind of stuff that political elites want to spend their time on and if it affects Americans all it does is reduce their opportunities."

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As part of his effort to change the culture at EPA, Pruitt is touting a "back-to-basics" agenda that emphasizes partnerships with states and issues he calls central to the agency's mission when Congress created it in 1970.

He's prioritizing cleanup of toxic Superfund sites, lead-tainted drinking water systems, and abandoned mines.

Those issues, he said, took a back seat the previous eight years as the Obama administration engaged in regulatory over-reach on climate change and the "Waters of the U.S." rule that spelled out that streams, rivers and other bodies can be regulated by the federal government.

"Our job is to administer statutes," he said in the interview. "We have to act based on the authority given to us by Congress. When this agency and other agencies in the past have gone askew is when they've created and filled in the vacuum. That's what they did with the Clean Power Plan ... We're correcting that."

Pruitt points to Superfund as an area that previous administrators should have taken more time to address. He's visited a lead-contaminated site in East Chicago, Ind., and the Gold King mine in Colorado (where a mistake by an EPA contractor in 2015 led to a major spill) to emphasize the program's importance.

He often talks about the problems at the West Lake Landfill near St. Louis and how the EPA still hasn't decided how to proceed 27 years after it was tagged as a Superfund site.

"Not clean it up. Not fix the problem. But just simply decide," he told the Federalist Society.

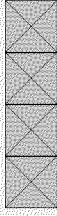
More than half of the original 406 sites from 1983 remain on the list. On average, it takes about 19 years for a site to be removed from the list, according to the Government Accountability Office.

When Pruitt last month told an audience of coal miners in Hazard, Ky., that "the war on coal is over" as he announced the administration's plan to repeal the Clean Power Plan, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., seemed clearly tickled.

"It's great to have an administrator of the EPA," McConnell said as he introduced Pruitt, "who's not afraid to come to Kentucky."

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