



OP-ED

New EPA administrator, same menace to the environment

BY JOEL A. MINTZ
mintzj@nova.edu

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The forced resignation of Scott Pruitt as administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) brought celebration and relief in many quarters. Pruitt was a walking scandal machine who generated an endless stream of headlines about spending abuses, cozy relationships with industry lobbyists, first-class travel at government expense, and aides asked to perform personal tasks, including buying lotions and mattresses and unsuccessfully helping his wife land a Chick-fil-A franchise.

Of more lasting consequence, he loyally adhered to the extreme, anti-environmental policies of his boss, President Trump. So, while Pruitt's departure was good news for anyone who's serious about public corruption, it remains to be seen whether it will have any impact on environmental policy.

Pruitt initiated a massive rollback of EPA regulations. He openly questioned the well-established science of climate change, and he presided over the dismantling of his agency's tardy, but ambitious, attempts to limit greenhouse gas pollution from power plants and motor vehicles. He also cut back significantly on efforts to protect water quality, proposed major cuts in the size of EPA's already much-diminished staff, thwarted efforts to conduct independent scientific research and imposed policies that undercut the agency's crucial enforcement work.

Pruitt's deputy administrator, Andrew K. Wheeler, will serve as acting administrator of the EPA for the foreseeable future. He's a long-time Washington insider and a former chief of staff to Oklahoma Sen. James Inhof — the Senate's most prominent climate change denier. Wheeler spent nine years as a lobbyist for various business clients, including a major coal company. Unlike Pruitt, who harbored hopes of high elected office, Wheeler has shunned the spotlight. To his credit, he told EPA employees that he is open to hearing their advice on policy matters — a welcome change from Pruitt's practice of ignoring and isolating his staff. He has also promised to instill more transparency in EPA's work.

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Notwithstanding these pledges of a more solicitous management style, there is no evidence that Wheeler plans to depart from the radical, safeguards-busting policies of his predecessor, policies strongly favored by President Trump. If he hopes to keep his job, let alone be nominated and confirmed to be EPA's administrator without the "acting" in his title, he will likely want to impress the boss. That makes serious deviations from Pruitt's positions unlikely since they're Trump's positions, as well.

In fact, Wheeler has already publicly committed himself to rolling back clean air and clean water rules. There's no good reason to think that he will reverse any other of Pruitt's policies.

Thus, in Wheeler, the president has an acting administrator who knows his way around Washington, is not mired in scandal, but appears just as committed as Pruitt to shredding environmental protections. That could make him a far more formidable destroyer of environmental regulation than his predecessor.

So, while the celebration over Pruitt's resignation is understandable, there seems scant reason for optimism that his departure will result in a meaningful change in the direction of EPA's harmful policies. If anything, Wheeler may hew even more closely to the White House's reactionary, anti-safeguards approach. Since he is not in the job to advance a political career, Wheeler will probably undo EPA regulations more effectively than Pruitt while avoiding the kinds of self-enriching personal scandals that led to Pruitt's downfall. To the extent Wheeler succeeds, the health of the American people, and the future of the world's climate, could suffer grave damage that will be difficult to undo.

JOEL A. MINTZ, A FORMER EPA OFFICIAL, IS A PROFESSOR OF LAW EMERITUS AND THE C. WILLIAM TROUT SENIOR FELLOW IN PUBLIC INTEREST LAW AT NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW. HE IS A MEMBER SCHOLAR OF THE CENTER FOR PROGRESSIVE REFORM.

