

## EPA

### Dissenters could be targeted — watchdog

Kevin Bogardus, E&E News reporter

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A prominent watchdog group is pushing back on speech restrictions at U.S. EPA and other federal agencies.

In a statement today, Jeff Ruch, executive director of **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**, said government workers who protest President Trump's policies risk being fired for speaking out.

"Federal employees who depart from the official talking points enter murky waters," Ruch said. "Unlike White House staff who are merely counseled about clear ethics violations, public employees trying to educate the public about the consequences of Trump initiatives may be targeted for discipline or removal."

PEER took note of a recent [email](#) obtained by E&E News that was sent out to EPA employees that reminded them of ethics rules and restrictions on their political activities ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 9).

That EPA advisory essentially warned agency employees to watch what they say, urging them to not refer to their EPA position or title when they are expressing their personal opinions.

"If you feel you must refer to your EPA position or title, then the prudential advice is to do so as one of several biographical details with EPA not having any undue prominence. You should be clear you are expressing an individual personal opinion, not speaking on behalf of the agency," said the email.

PEER said it is unclear what details a climate scientist at a federal agency must share so the facts about his or her employment are not unduly prominent. The watchdog group also mentioned that federal employees will have to watch what they say about Trump, considering the president has already filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission to run for re-election, and government workers are covered by the Hatch Act, which limits federal employees' political activities.

Dissent among employees against the incoming Trump administration is becoming more common at EPA and other agencies. Last week, EPA employees held a protest at the agency's Chicago-based Region 5 office. Further, rogue agency Twitter accounts

have popped up since Trump's inauguration, some of which PEER has been assisting, according to Ruch.

"Besides social media, organizations like PEER, federal unions and even professional scientific societies will increasingly become channels for public employee free speech," Ruch said. "Times have changed — both the public and public employees are demanding more candor and have less tolerance for censorship than ever before."

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