

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS LUNCHEON WITH ANDREW WHEELER

SUBJECT: THE STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

MODERATOR: ALISON FITZGERALD KODJAK, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HOLEMAN LOUNGE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 12:30 P.M.

DATE: MONDAY, JUNE 3, 2019

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ALISON FITZGERALD KODJAK: Good afternoon. Welcome to the National Press Club, the place where news happens. My name is Alison Fitzgerald Kodjak. I'm a correspondent at NPR News and I'm the President of the National Press Club. Today, we have a terrific program for you, and we invite you to listen, watch or follow along on Twitter at the hashtag #NPCLive. For those watching us today on C-SPAN or any other program, please be aware that our audience today consists of members of the press, Press Club members, and members of the general public. So any applause or other reactions you hear aren't necessarily from the working press.

I'd like to take a moment to introduce our guests at the head table today. To my far left, we have Phillip Brasher, Executive Editor at Agri-Pulse Communications; Eva McKend, Congressional Correspondent at Spectrum News; Rod Kuckro, a reporter at E&E News; Ryan Jackson, the EPA Chief of Staff and a guest of our speaker.

Skipping over the podium, we have Lori Russo, President of Stanton Communications and the co-chair of the NPC Headliners Team; skipping over our speaker for a moment, we have Jennifer Dlouhy, Energy and Environmental Policy Reporter at Bloomberg News; Kevin Wensing, he's a retired U.S. Navy captain, chair at FCA America, and the NPC member who organized today's luncheon. Thank you, Kevin. And finally, Jan Jekielek, Senior Editor at the Epoch Times and the host of "American Thought Leaders."

I also want to acknowledge some additional members of the National Press Club who helped organize this luncheon; Donna Leinwand Leger, the other co-Headliners Team

Leader; we have the Press Club staff liaison, Lindsay Underwood, chef Susan Delbert, who prepared your meal, and NPC Executive Director, Bill McCarron. Thank you all. (Applause)

Andrew Wheeler was confirmed as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency last November. But his tenure leading the agency started months earlier when his predecessor, Scott Pruitt, resigned amid a series of ethics scandals. Wheeler has a long history at the agency. His first job in Washington, in fact, was at the EPA where he worked on chemical regulations, pollution prevention and right to know issues.

He went on to serve as a staff member to Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, and George Voinovich of Ohio. And finally, as Chief Counsel and Staff Director at the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, the committee with jurisdiction over the EPA.

During that time, he worked mostly to reduce environmental regulation. He left Capitol Hill in 2009 and headed to K Street where he served as a lobbyist. And one of his biggest clients was the coal company Murray Energy. Mr. Wheeler returned to EPA last year when President Trump nominated him to become Deputy Administrator and then took over when Mr. Wheeler left-- excuse me, when Mr. Pruitt left.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I haven't left yet.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: You haven't left yet. (Laughter) He recently told CBS News that while he thinks climate change is an important issue, the threat is too far in the future to focus on today. Instead, he said, the EPA and its colleagues around the world should focus on insuring that everyone has access to clean drinking water. I'm sure we'll have lots to talk about this afternoon, so please join me in giving a warm National Press Club welcome to EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler. (Applause)

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Good afternoon, and it's a pleasure to be with you today. Thank you, Alison, for the warm welcome, and thank you, Kevin, for organizing this lunch. Since this is the National Press Club, I'd be remiss not to use this opportunity to address my friends in the media. Every year since 2001, Gallup has conducted polling on the same question: do you think the quality of the environment in the country as a whole is getting better or getting worse? Every year since 2001, more people have said getting worse than getting better, often by large margins.

We need to fix this perception and we need the help of the press. The public needs to know how far we've come as a nation protecting the environment. And here are a few environmental indicators that need to get more attention. From 1970 to 2017, the U.S. has reduced the six main criteria air pollutants 73 percent while the economy grew over 260 percent. Between 2000 and 2017, fine particulate matter concentrations in the U.S. dropped by roughly 40 percent.

According to the World Health Organization, the U.S. has some of the lowest fine particulate matter levels in the world; more than five times below the global average, seven times below Chinese levels, and well below France, Germany, Mexico and Russia. In 2005 to

2017, the U.S. reduced its energy-related CO2 emissions by 14 percent. In contrast, global energy related CO2 emissions have increased over 20 percent since 2005.

On the water front, we've made similar progress. Over the past decades, the U.S. has transformed many of its rivers, lakes and bays from dumping grounds to meccas of tourism and economic activity. In the 1970s, more than 40 percent of our nation's drinking water systems failed to meet even the most basic health standards. Today, over 92 percent of community water systems meet all health based standards all the time.

I could go on with more stats and more evidence of our nation's progress, but my purpose in doing this is not to minimize the environmental challenges or threats that we face today. The press actually reminds me of that on a regular basis. But the media does a disservice to the American public and sound policymaking by not informing the public of the progress that this nation has made.

This progress is the result of many people across the country; state and local governments, citizen groups, businesses, and even the media. But just as important are the career employees of the EPA. Next year, we will celebrate our 50th anniversary. Political leadership comes and goes at the agency, but the career employees of the EPA have been on the job for almost 50 years.

Pollution is on the decline. My focus now is to accelerate its decline, particularly in the most at risk communities. We recognize that environmental public health issues disproportionately impact low income and minority communities. These are the communities most likely to live near hazardous sites or suffer from outdated infrastructure. These are the Americans that deserve our full and immediate attention. That is the lens through which President Trump shaped his agency and that is the lens through which we have shaped ours.

There may be no better example than our renewed focus on the Superfund program, the federal program responsible for cleaning up some of the nation's largest hazardous sites. In the past, it wasn't unusual for a site to sit on the Superfund National Priorities List for decades. The Westlake land fill in Missouri, home to radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project, has been on the NPL list for nearly two decades.

At the end of last year, we approved the plan to finally clean up that site. We believe that a site on the National Priorities List should be just that; a national priority. We recognize how important it is to get these sites cleaned up and returned to safe, productive use. In fiscal year 2018, the EPA deleted all or part of 22 sites from the National Priorities List, the largest number of deletions in one year since Fiscal Year 2005. We are in the process of cleaning up some of the nation's largest, most complex sites and returning them to productive use. By prioritizing the Superfund program, we are prioritizing the health and well-being of the communities that live near these sites.

We're taking the same approach with our Brownfields program, which provides grants and technical assistance to help communities clean up contaminated properties. Later this week, we will announce nearly \$65 million in Brownfields grants to 149 communities

across the country. We are targeting these funds to areas that need them the most. Nineteen percent of the selected recipients are in urban areas, while 81 percent are in nonurban areas, areas with populations of 100,000 or less. Overall, 40 percent of the grants will go to the smallest of communities with populations below 10,000.

In addition, 40 percent of the selected communities are receiving Brownfields funding for the first time ever. This means that we are reaching areas that may have been previously neglected.

We've also made it a priority to prioritize opportunity zones. These are the economically distressed areas that can be designated for preferential tax treatment under the president's new tax law. We are awarding Brownfields grants in opportunity zones from Detroit to Huntington, West Virginia, to Belfast, Maine, just to name a few. I hope the press will help us tell this story. The purpose of the Brownfields program is much more than just revitalizing individual properties. Its purpose is to be a catalyst that will spark an economic revival in forgotten and struggling communities. Attention from the press will amplify our efforts and drive more investments into these neglected areas.

The same mindset is carried over into our regulatory approach. There is no disputing who benefits from complex, confusing regulations that can only be interpreted by high paid lawyers and consultants. Small businesses cannot suffer these costs. So we are focused on providing regulatory certainty and clarity that every American can understand. This is the goal of our new waters of the U.S. definition. Our ultimate objective is that property owners should be able to stand on their property and tell if a water is federal or not without hiring outside professionals.

In order to achieve this, we are cleaning defining the differences between federally protected waterways and state protected waterways. The same day the proposal was signed, we convened a work group of EPA and Army Corps scientists to explore the ways we can accurately map which waters are in and which waters are not.

Finally, we are providing the certainty the American public needs in a manner that will be upheld by the courts. That is why we are closely following the language of the Clean Water Act and the relevant Supreme Court decisions. Right now, because of litigation, the 2015 rule is in effect in 22 states while the previous regulations issued in the 1980s are in effect in the remaining 28 states. Our proposal would end this confusing patchwork and establish national consistency.

Just as we are concerned about the clarity and quality of our rule making, we're also concerned with the intent and the impact. Our role within the executive branch is to implement the law and create a fair and level playing field. That is the motivation behind our new Affordable Clean Energy Rule, or ACE, which we intend to finalize this month.

I've been accused of rolling back the clean power plant, but you can't roll back something that never went into effect. Twenty-seven states challenged it, the Supreme Court intervened and issued an historic stay. The CPP would have asked low and middle income

Americans to bear the cost of the previous administration's climate plan. Our analysis, well one analysis, projected double digit electricity price increases in 40 states. Rising energy prices hurt low and middle income Americans the most, particularly senior citizens and minorities.

Our ACE proposal would adhere to the four corners of the Clean Air Act and allow the states to establish standards of performance that meet EPA's emissions guidelines. This will give states and the private sector the regulatory certainty they need to invest in new technologies and continue to provide affordable and reliable energy. When ACE is fully implemented, it will reduce U.S. power sector CO2 emissions by 34 percent below 2005 levels.

We're applying the same approach to vehicle standards through our proposed safe, affordable fuel efficient vehicles rule, or SAFE rule. It's no secret that the previous administration's approach focused almost exclusively on energy efficiency and carbon dioxide reductions. We do not believe this is the right approach; right for public safety or the environment. And here's why.

The average age of vehicles on the road today is at a record high of 12 years. In 1990, the average age was 8 years. The lack of fleet turnover creates a host of problems. Research shows that passengers are more likely to be killed in older vehicles compared to newer ones. And we know that older vehicles are less efficient and pollute more. So our approach is to achieve multiple policy goals by locking in emission reductions and getting older vehicles off the road, which will save lives and improve air quality.

Compared to keeping the 2012 standards in place, the preferred option in our proposal would reduce the cost of owning a new car by more than \$2,300. These savings would help Americans purchase newer cars and trucks, and thereby improving the environment and saving lives. We believe this approach is better for the entire country, for all 50 states, as opposed to the previous administration's approach which sought to incentivize certain kinds of technologies that are limited to a wealthy subset of the population in affluent areas with the infrastructure to support them.

A study by the Department of Transportation found that about two-thirds of households with battery electric or plug-in hybrid electric vehicles had incomes higher than \$100,000. And according to a report from University of California Berkeley's Energy Institute, the top income quintile that has received about 90 percent of all electric vehicle tax credits. Vehicle standards should not be used to play favorites. Our job at EPA is to level the playing field and look out for the health and safety of all Americans, not just those that can afford electric cars.

On the vehicle front, we're also moving forward with a new proposal to help areas around the country, particularly urban centers reduce air pollution from mobile sources. This will help areas in non-attainment reach attainment, which alleviates the regulatory burdens and brings back jobs and opportunities. The new proposal is our Cleaner Trucks Initiative. Since 2000, nitrogen oxide NOx emissions in the U.S. have been reduced by 52 percent.

However, it is estimated that heavy duty trucks will be responsible for one-third of all NOx emissions from transportation by 2025. And it's been nearly 20 years since EPA last set NOx emission standards for heavy duty trucks. By working closely with states and the private sector, we will reduce NOx emissions from heavy duty trucks, which is not required by statute or by court order, but it makes sense to do and will help more areas of our country reach attainment. We intend to issue our cleaner truck proposal at the beginning of next year.

The final example of our new regulatory mindset that I like to share is our forthcoming lead and copper rule. It's been more than two decades since the lead and copper rule was updated. We are committed to getting it done this year, and we are committed to getting it done right. When I was briefed by my staff on our progress last fall, I told them that I was very concerned that the last mile of lead surface lines that are replaced are not the most corrosive in our country. It is estimated to take 20 to 30 years to replace all of our lead surface lines across the entire country.

I was worried that we would end up replacing pipes in affluent neighborhoods first, leaving low income communities until the end. These communities can't afford to wait the 10 to 20 years to have their pipes replaced. So I directed our team to insure that we are addressing the most corrosive pipes in the most at risk communities first. They're currently working on mapping where all the lead and copper pipes across the country are located. And when we roll out our proposed rule, we'll be able to focus our work on the most impacted areas of the country.

I could go on with more examples. Our permitting reforms will insure that all businesses can navigate the permitting process and not wait years for decisions. On the international front, we're elevating the focus on water issues from infrastructure to marine litter to clean drinking water. According to the United Nations, 1,000 children die every day from a lack of potable drinking water and proper sanitation. To me, that is a crisis and it's a crisis that we know how to solve.

Across the board, we have realigned and refocused our efforts on the most in need. As the president has said, the forgotten men and women are forgotten no longer.

Before I conclude, I can't pass up the opportunity for one final note to the press. You may think that I ignore our press clippings, but I don't. I read them every day. And I've noticed five things-- well, I really only have time for five-- that some of the press consistently gets wrong about the administration and this EPA in particular.

One, that the environment is getting worse. I already addressed this earlier. We've made tremendous progress since the 1970s, and that needs to be noted more often.

Two, that I was a former coal lobbyist. I was actually an energy and environmental lobbyist. I represented dozens of companies, including a solar company, nuclear including an air quality management agency in California.

Three, that we are rolling back regulations like CPP or MATS. CPP was never implemented, so it can't be rolled back. And MATS was completely implemented, so we can't roll that back, either. What we're doing on MATS is addressing the underlying assumptions and calculations that the Supreme Court asked us to look into.

Four, that meeting with the regulatory community runs counter to environmental protection. How can we be effective regulators if we never talk to or meet with the people that we regulate?

And here's another untold truth. The quickest way to correct an environmental harm is to often help the violator insure a return to compliance. Long, drawn out enforcement disputes help no one, including the environment.

And finally, number five, that there's an ongoing war or feud between the EPA political and career staff. That's just not true. I started my career, as Alison says, a career employee at the agency. We're getting ready to celebrate our 50th anniversary next year. We still have 10 employees that started with the agency 49 years ago.

I'm not going to give their names today, as I've told them all that they have to wait one more year before I publicly recognize them. But I hope all ten of them stay with the agency. And we have a long, dedicated history of dedicated career employees at the agency.

On that note, I'll be happy to take your questions, take some of them with me, might answer a few of them here. Thank you for your time, thank you for your attention, and thank you for the opportunity to address the Press Club. Thank you very much. (Applause)

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: As I said, we have a lot of questions already, but please, bring your questions up if you want. Since you talked a lot about water, I just figured I'd start right in and ask you, what is the situation right now in Flint, Michigan?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Right now, Flint, Michigan, is attaining the water quality standards. We test their water on a regular basis. We're working with the local city as well as the state. We're still providing bottled drinking water to people if they need it, but at this point the water quality in Flint, Michigan, is safe to drink. And that's one of the reasons why the president directed us to look at the lead and copper rule. You know, we're not under requirement to update that rule. But we want to make sure that there are no Flint, Michigans in the future.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: You talked a little bit about auto emission standards. And I just want to make sure I understood what you were saying. You were essentially saying that increasing emission standards increase the cost of vehicles. So thereby, not increasing them makes people more likely to buy a new car and that will overall reduce?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Yes. You know, a lot of people don't realize that the automobile manufacturers are not currently meeting the standards today, or last year,

even. And they have paid penalties to the government for failure to meet the standards. And they do it-- and the way they do-- very few companies actually meet the standards. Some of them do it by trading. Some of them do it by other programs such as reducing air conditioning emissions from the cars. But a number of companies are paying fines to the federal government every year and that is expected to reach by the end of the Obama original proposal by 2025, up to a billion dollars a year in fines paid to the federal government. That's money that is then passed back on to consumers when they buy their cars.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: So I have a question here that says this administration has rejected climate change issues and impacts at almost every turn and action. Do you think climate issues should play a larger role in your agency's actions?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: We are addressing climate change. The reason we're doing the ACE regulation, which will reduce CO2 emissions from the electric power sector by 34 percent from 2005 levels is because we are moving forward to address climate change. So no, we are addressing it. We're looking at methane. Our CAFÉ standard will also reduce CO2 from the automobile sector. So no, we take climate change seriously and we are implementing the laws that Congress has given us, and we are moving forward on ACE, on CAFÉ, on methane as well.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: During your Deputy Director confirmation hearing you said, "I believe that man has an impact on climate. But what's not entirely understood is what the impact is." Since you have been at the EPA, has your understanding of man's impact changed or improved?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: That was typed out, so that, somebody was prepared.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: We got some early.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: You know, I continue to have briefings from our career scientists at the agency on climate change as well as a number of other issues on a regular basis. I was a little critical of the national climate assessment when it came out last November, December, end of last year. I was mostly critical, though, on how it was being portrayed in the press because all the press reports focused on the worst case scenario; the RCPA .5, which even the UN's IPCC is moving away from. And the direction of the 8.5 in the national assessment last year, that was actually a direction by the Obama White House to tell the career staff what to look at as far as worst case scenario. So I thought that was political interference by the Obama White House in that process.

This administration did not stop the assessment from going forward, and we published it as it was. But I do think we need to take a more realistic look at the worst case scenarios, all the scenarios going forward. There's a lot of uncertainties when you get 50, 75 years out. We need to better understand those uncertainties and do a much better job of explaining to people what they are and what they mean.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Do you think you should be preparing for the worst case scenarios?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Well, it depends. On the RCP 8.5, I mean even the United Nations is moving away from that. So I'm not sure that that's the worst case scenario we should be preparing for. But that's part of why we need to do a better job of understanding the uncertainties in the modeling so we can figure out what do we need to prepare for? What is the right level to prepare for?

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: So this question, sort of that's what we've been talking about. It says clearly the Trump EPA is headed in a different direction than the previous administration. How do you see your direction or approach?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I would say the Obama Administration almost singlehandedly focused on climate change, which is a very important issue and we are focusing on that. We are addressing it. But I think at the expense of other programs like the Superfund program, the fact that we had 22 sites de-listed last year, the most since 2005. We will have a similar number de-listed this year. I'm personally taking a lot of time on these Superfund sites and briefings by the staff to make sure that we are selecting the right remedy to get these sites cleaned up and get past the lawsuits and the legal maneuvering from the responsible parties to try to make sure we have agreement and we can get these sites cleaned up and back in productive use and safeguard the people who live around those sites.

The last month, we listed a new site. So while we're de-listing, we're also listing new sites. We listed seven or eight, I think it was eight, sites last month to the national priority list. One of them was a small town in West Virginia, Mendon, West Virginia. They have about 250 people now from a high of 1,200. That community has been hit really hard because of the environmental degradation that's from PCBs in the area.

If you had this in the news every year for the last 20, 30 years, who wants to move to that city? And the people who live there now, who would they sell their houses to if they wanted to leave? We owe it to that community, even though there's only 250 people who live there, and communities like that around the country to get those sites cleaned up and to give them the focus and the attention that they need. There's a lot of forgotten communities like that all across the country.

And what we're trying to do at the agency through the Superfund program and our Brownfields program and our economic-- and focusing on the zip codes with the most economic degradation around is to try to give some help and support to those communities. So I think that's very important, very important for the EPA to focus on.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: And you discussed when you were discussing Brownfields that 40 percent of the grants were going to rural small towns or rural communities. I guess the counterpoint would be shouldn't the money be directed to places where a lot of people live that have more impact?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: We've done that a long time in the Brownfields program and we're still doing that. I think there's approximately 20 percent are going to large urban areas, and those are the areas that have received a lot of the Brownfields grants over the years. We did not just decide we're not giving to large cities anymore. This was all done by career staff and by looking at each grant application as a competitive basis.

And a lot for these small areas, they deserve to have these environmental sites cleaned up. You know, the PCBs that were produced and were used in Mendon, West Virginia, didn't go to help the people who lived in Mendon at the time. They went to help people in larger cities. We owe it to those communities to clean up their environment just like we owe it to people in urban areas, too. But 20 percent of our grants are going to large urban areas.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: This question is many say you are doing industry's bidding at EPA, taking actions that favor many of your biggest clients. How do you address those concerns?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Well, I'm not. We have very clear ethics regulations by the Trump ethics pledge, I've upheld that. I've not met with any of my former clients, I've not talked to my former clients. So no, I'm not doing anybody's bidding but President Trump and the American people.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Why has EPA defunded a two-decade national project to research the impact of environmental pollutants on children? Says Congress sought to continue the funding, but EPA said it's a matter of appropriations.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I'm not sure what--

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: I have two questions on this, I don't know--

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I'm not sure which program that's referring to. We made a change in the leadership of our children's health office this last year. Children's health is very important. We've asked for new funding next year for a school initiative. We have a lot of programs across the entire agency that focus on PCBs in schools, or focus on lead in schools or drinking water in schools and they're all kind of separate and across the board.

What we're doing with this new healthy schools initiative is to try to bring all that under one umbrella to help school administrators and principals figure out what are the important renovations they need to make in their schools to make sure that children have a healthy education, that they go to school in a healthy school for a healthy education.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: We have several question about Roundup, or glyphosate. And the first one is just quite simple: what's the EPA's position on the safety of Roundup?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: That is currently in litigation. There's been a couple of cases out in California. We've just-- and I believe we put the new scientific review out for comment, but we do not believe this is a carcinogen. And this is in keeping with a number of other health organizations around the world. And this is a long-term study started at the agency before I got there by the career scientists in the agency.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: So that goes against what the World Health Organization recently said, that it's a probable carcinogen.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Yes, the World Health Organization's the only, I believe, international body that's said that. This has been looked at by a number of regulatory agencies around the world and we're in line and in keeping with where other regulatory bodies are.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: This person asked, have you visited any frontline communities in the last year? And if so, what do you see and what policies are moving forward to help them be protected? I think this is a question related to pesticides and chemicals.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I've visited with a lot of farming communities around the country since I've been on the job. Also visited a number of Superfund sites around the country. During my first year, I focused on getting out to all of our EPA regions. We have ten regions around the country. I do all hands meetings in all regions, and I take questions from our career employees until they're out of questions. So I'm trying to meet with as many communities around the country to find out what is bothering them.

I was in Mendon, West Virginia, earlier last month. Did a community meeting and took a lot of questions and stayed after to answer more questions from the people who live in that community.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: And what is worrying them?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: They're worried about the state of their community and what may or may not be causing the health impacts that they see. And we're moving forward with health screening and we're working in partnership with ASDR to screen the people who live there. I was up in New York visiting a Superfund site, New Jersey. And I'm also going out to a lot of the water bodies. We need to make sure we're protecting our large water bodies. I was up in Michigan with some of the local environmental groups seeing what they do to help with wetlands restoration.

I've done that with the Chesapeake Bay here as well in the DC area and down in Louisiana to make sure our coast is being restored following the oil spill in the Gulf. Been down there twice now. I think it's important to get out in the field to see what we are doing to clean up the environment.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: There's actually a question here about ocean plastics and the concern that ocean plastic pollution is getting much worse. I know EPA doesn't have control over the world's oceans, but is there a role for EPA to be a leader in trying to clean up ocean plastics?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: There is. I was just at the Germany environmental ministers meeting a month and a half ago in France, and I'll be at the G20 environmental ministers meeting later this month. And that is a big issue for me. In addition to drinking water worldwide is also the ocean plastics. Sixty percent of the plastic debris in the oceans comes from six Asian countries. If you look at the list of contributing countries, United States is ranked 20th. So we still need to do more here. We need to do a lot more on recycling in our country.

But we need to work with the six Asian countries that are producing 60 percent of the ocean's plastic debris and work to clean those up. At the EPA, we have some international projects; one in Panama, one in Jamaica and one in Peru. They're all here in this hemisphere. But what I've done as EPA Administrator is talk to my counterparts at the EU, as well as Canada and Japan. And we're committed to taking a lot at the pilot programs that we've all done individually and try to figure out what are the best pilots to go to the next level with those six countries to try to make sure that those countries are reducing the ocean plastics that go into the oceans.

But it goes into the ocean in Asia but it ends up on our beaches in the United States, not to mention getting into the food supply and affecting the marine ecosystems. So we have to address this globally as a world. But there are some best practices out there and we're trying to figure out what are the best practices that can be replicated in countries such as Sri Lanka or Vietnam that are contributing the plastics to the oceans.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: So we have a couple of pretty detailed questions on chemicals.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Oh, those weren't detailed before?

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Well, the first FDA market basket sampling of food found several instances of a surprisingly high readings of various PFAS; seafood and cake in grocery stores. Public health groups in many states say the EPA need to act more quickly to set a maximum contaminate level for PFAS.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: PFAS? So it's PFAS, PFOA.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: PFAS? Okay, sorry.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: That's all right. So we came out with an action plan earlier this year. It's the most comprehensive action plan for a category of chemicals ever produced by the EPA in our 49-year history. And we did that in under a year. We had a lot of career staff working long hours to put that together. And we're addressing it under all

of our statutes. EPA in our 49-year history has a history of being very siloed. We have our air office, our water office, our lands office, our chemical office and we've had historically a difficult time working across those silos.

What we did on our PFAS, PFOA action plan is try to break down those silos and have the teams work together. And we are moving forward on toxicity standards for the chemicals under our enforcement office on cleaning up where we find it. We've already initiated eight enforcement actions to clean up PFAS PFOA where we find it. We're also working-- we've worked with states on 20 more enforcement actions around the country.

We're looking under our chemicals program to make sure we test for this. I'm seeing a few blank faces in the audience on this one. PFAS PFOA, they've been in the environment 40, 50 years. The most famous one would be Teflon pans, the chemical in the Teflon pans. There's also the chemical in Scotchgard. Also, the chemical in Gore-Tex clothing. So if you think about it, everybody has it in their homes. It's been around for a long time. And the problem is it gets into the environment and it's a persistent-- it's a persistent biological accumulator. It gets in the water system, for example, and you have to clean it up.

But the problem is that there are thousands of these different chemicals and they don't all have the same risk. But you also can't use the same test to test for each of them, and you can't use the same method to clean them all up. So I know that there are people who would like for us to move faster, but we're doing some groundbreaking research in our research labs in Cincinnati and in North Carolina to try to identify the chemicals earlier, to try to identify which chemicals are causing the health problem. And then what are the best cleanup solutions, depending on which one of the compounds it is.

So this is a very complicated issue. But we have addressed this much faster than the agency has ever done for chemical of concern like this before.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: This one is about perchlorate in water, saying the EPA reached the newly announced a proposed drinking water limit that's three times higher than the previous limit for perchlorate in drinking water. What's the reasoning behind that?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: That was a proposal. We've come out with three levels in the proposal. We're taking comment on that right now. This is based on the most recent science, and this is something that our career scientists have been working on for several years now. Predates our administration. But we put out the proposal based on their recommendations and research. We know a lot more about perchlorate than we did ten years ago. It's much more isolated than we thought it was. There's a problem in California. California has a standard in place and part of the proposal is to try to figure out where else is it a problem.

Before you go forward with a drinking water standard that would require every drinking water system in the country to test for something, if it's unlikely to be in those water systems, you have to ask whether or not it's right to require everybody to test for it. If we

know where the perchlorate is used and where it's found, we can focus our cleanup efforts in those areas.

So we're taking comment on all of this. We haven't reached any conclusions yet and I encourage anybody who's interested or concerned about perchlorate to please read the proposal. It's out for public comment in the federal register and send us your thoughts on it.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: I think you may have addressed this in your prepared marks, but do you see a role for the federal government, not just the EPA, to support auto industry transition to electrification?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Sure. But I don't think it's the EPA's responsibility to decide that we're going to move to electric vehicles. I think as long as we have a level playing field where manufacturers are able to produce the cars that people want to purchase, then that's what we need to do. The EPA doesn't-- I think it would be a misuse of our regulatory authority if we decided what everybody should or should not purchase going forward. We have to have the standards in place for all types of transplants, standards that would be applied to all types of vehicles. And it's important to remember there's been some criticism that our standards would stop innovation. I just don't believe that. I think our automobile industry is incredibly innovative and they're going to continue to produce automobiles and cars and trucks that people want to purchase.

It's not the EPA's job to try to determine what people are going to want to purchase five or ten years from now. It's our job to set the standards and allow the marketplace to work.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: But just to clarify, the standards weren't specifically for electric vehicles. They were for emissions, right? So they would have been perceived--

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: But for the Obama regulations, the only way they could have complied with the standards would be to have 50 percent EVs by 2025. So you don't have to say you have to have electric vehicle. But if you set a standard that only electric vehicles can meet, then you're de facto saying it has to be an electric vehicle.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Do you see a role for EPA in the development of carbon capture and sequestration technology? And how important is that for achieving climate goals?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I think it's very important for achieving climate goals. I think the Department of Energy has pretty much taken the lead on funding research for carbon capture and sequestration. I think the important thing would be to make sure that once that technology is commercial and is able to be used across the country that we have the regulatory process and system in place to allow its use.

But as far as research, we do some research in the climate area, of course. But our research is more at the other end of the process and not the energy technology side, which is more of a Department of Energy function.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: This questioner says the EPA has plans to change the way air pollution related mortality is calculated, a move that a recent *New York Times* article says would result in fewer predicted deaths from pollution and make it easier for the administration to roll back the Clean Power Act. Why is EPA changing the way it calculates the health risks of air pollution?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Well, a couple of things. I think, first of all, as I said in my remarks, were not rolling back the Clean Power Plan. Supreme Court issued a stay before it was ever in effect. You can't roll back something that never took effect.

But what we're doing, and I think this is probably what the questioner is getting to, is how coal benefits are calculated. And we had the MATS decisions, the mercury emissions. The Supreme Court found fault with the previous administration on the way they calculated cost benefit analysis under the Clean Air Act. Our MATS proposal that we put out last year does change the way we calculate coal benefits.

The important thing to remember on the mercury regulation was that 99 percent of the benefits from that regulation-- this is a regulation that is supposed to reduce mercury from power plants; 99 percent of the benefits, actually, were attributed to particulate matter. We already have particulate matter regulations in place. We have particulate matter regulations that are set to public health numbers and the mercury, because they couldn't justify the cost of the mercury reductions, they used the coal benefits argument of going further for PM benefits, which is, I believe, double counting.

So what we're doing is following the Supreme Court's case and the direction that the Supreme Court gave us and reviewing the calculations for the mercury standards. But I do want to assure everybody, and everybody listening, that we do not believe the mercury reductions will be compromised at all by our look because we did both the cost benefit analysis for the mercury reductions, as well as the technology review, which is required under the Clean Air Act.

And under the technology review, we determined that the equipment that has already been installed is already reducing the mercury needs to remain in place. So we do not expect any increase in mercury emissions at all. What we're doing under this proposed-- for mercury is follow the Supreme Court's dictate to us on how we calculate cost benefit analysis.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: We had a couple of questions about the coal industry. Basically, I have two here. One person says that the president really ran on trying to save the coal industry and save coal jobs. And even though the industry seems to be shrinking all on its own because of market forces, is EPA and other parts of the administration artificially propping up the industry and should it be?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: No, I don't think we're artificially propping up the industry at all. If I could answer it this way, again, the Obama Administration's Clean Power Plant, or CPP, basically declared war on the coal industry and they went after one industry in particular. And the Clean Power Plant did not follow the Clean Air Act, which is why I believe the Supreme Court issued their historic stay.

What I believe the Obama Administration neglected in their rationale and thinking is the fact that worldwide, coal electricity has not yet peaked. China, Indonesia, India, continue to build new coal fired power plants. Clean coal technology has developed here in the United States. What the Clean Power Plant did was basically take the U.S. clean coal technology industry offline. If we don't develop the technologies here, they won't get developed.

There is more mercury deposited in the United States from Asian power plants than all of the U.S. power plants. Mercury is something that goes up in the atmosphere, travels around the world. We're getting our mercury emissions deposit in the United States from the Asian power plants. If you take the coal sector out of commission in the United States, you take the development of cleaner coal technologies from ever being developed. And those technologies are then exported to other countries.

I think that's a disservice to the environment, disservice to our country and it's outside of the regulatory power of the agency to try to dictate what type of fuels will be used, which is what the Obama Clean Power Plan did. Our proposal, the ACE proposal, should go final this month, creates a level playing field. We're not dictating what percent of electricity should come from coal. Right now, we're about 28, 29 percent coal dependent. We used to be about 55 to 60 percent. It's probably going to go down a little bit from where it is today, but the important thing is by the Obama Administration's actions, it would have taken the development of new clean coal technologies off the table.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: And no other country would do that, you're saying?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Not really. We developed the clean coal technology. We developed the cleaner technologies and export those worldwide. Our methane emissions, you know, we have doubled the amount of natural gas, LNG, produced since 2000. And our methane emissions have decreased 15 percent. Other countries such as Russia who are developing their natural gas, they're not reducing their methane to the extent that we are here. We're doing it because of clean technologies that are being developed by the regulated community.

You know, something that-- the regulated community gets-- the natural gas producers get it, but I don't think the Sierra Club does is the fact that methane is the product. If they're leaking methane, then they're leaking their product. By working cooperatively with the regulated industry, I mean we've gotten methane emissions down 15 percent. At the same time doubling our production. They're not doing that in Russia, they're not doing that in other countries.

We produce our coal cleaner than most other countries. We produce our natural gas cleaner than other countries and we produce our oil cleaner than other countries. So it's not just-- when the United States exports our energy, we don't just export our energy, we also export our clean technologies and we don't trample on the sovereign rights of our trading partners when we do that.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: We have two questions about the climate kids' lawsuit that's coming up for a hearing in Oregon. How do you assess that lawsuit?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: You're asking me legally how do I think it's-- it's interesting.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Legally, personally?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: It's a very interesting lawsuit. I don't think it's going to go much further as far as standing. I know there's been back and forth on the cases, gone up and back down again. It's going back up again now through the court systems. It hasn't really been tried on the merits yet. I think they're doing--

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Does anybody have standing? I'm curious.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Well, I think if we didn't move forward with climate regulations, then people would have standing to challenge us for that. As far as standing to challenge what might happen 50 or 70 years from now, I don't know that they do. I say that and there's a lot of free thinking judges out there that like to give standing to new groups all the time. So I'm not going to prejudge where that case may end up.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Somebody asked your opinion of the Green New Deal. Is it realistic or is it a job killer? You can fill in whatever you'd like to call it.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: (Laughter) Well, I don't think it's realistic. Just to keep my EPA hat on, we are a public health and environment agency. And one of the things that we do, and I don't talk about it enough. I try to talk about it with the career employees all the time, is our emergency response. We respond to emergencies around the country almost every single day. And the largest response is hurricanes, tornadoes that people know about and read about in the papers.

But there's small, one-car train derailments that we respond to. We're responding to something everywhere in the country every single day. When we have a large scale incident like the hurricanes last fall, when we go on the ground, one of the first things we do is try to make sure that the grid is up and functioning in order to power the drinking water systems. We consider the drinking water systems to be a primary health function and we have to make sure that we have a reliable electric grid to insure that we have safe drinking water.

What the Green New Deal does not do anywhere in it that I've read or read about it is that it values a reliable electric grid. Now, there have been other climate bills in the past, you

know, there were climate bills that were debated when I was on the Hill 15 years ago, that at least, whether they meant it or not, talked about grid reliability in the language, at least maybe in the preamble or the findings, about the importance. I don't see that reflected in the Green New Deal, the acknowledgement that we have to have a reliable electric grid. If for nothing else, for great events like this, but if nothing else so people at home can watch it on TV.

In order to power our drinking water systems around the country, we have to have electricity to do that, and that's not a value that's in the Green New Deal.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: We had several questions about your predecessor, so I will try to push them together.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I've had 14 predecessors. I'm the 15th.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: You're most recent predecessor.

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I'm the 15th EPA administrator.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Well, this person asked when Scott Pruitt was head of the EPA, it was a difficult time at the agency. And they said the morale was pretty low given some of the ethics issues that he faced. Have you changed the atmosphere or mood in the agency staff? And how had his tenure made your job any harder?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: Well, I think there is always a change in morale and attitudes at an agency, any agency or department, when you change from one administration to the next. And I've been in this, in and around Washington, D.C., started off at EPA during the George H. W. Bush Administration. Actually was there the last two years of the George H. W. Bush Administration and the first two years of the Clinton Administration. And I can tell you, there was a lot of unease at EPA during that transition, from the Bush Administration to the Clinton Administration.

So there's always unease, particularly in the first year of any new administration. What I've done since I've been the Acting Administrator last summer, is I visited all ten of our regional offices. I visited our three largest labs. I have plans to visit the rest of our labs. I do all hands meetings with our career employees. I listen to them, I let them ask me any question that they want. And to be honest, their questions are harder than yours today.

But I answer them and I think-- I'm sorry. I answer them and I think that they like that and it's reassuring that they know they're being heard. And they are.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: This person says the EPA's workforce has decreased by nearly 1,200 employees in the last two years. Does that concern you and what's the reasoning behind that?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: It absolutely concerns me. Forty percent of the EPA workforce, and I'm not just thinking of the ten that have been with us for 49 years, but 40 percent of the EPA workforce is eligible to retire over the next five years. While I don't think they will all retire over the next five years, I have to as a manager plan that they will be retiring over the next ten years.

We went several years without a head of our human resources office. We just hired a new head of our human resources office, and I think she started in February. I actually interviewed her and I'm told that was unusual for an EPA administrator to interview that level of employee because it's about three levels down. But I wanted to make sure that she knew some of the issues and concerns and challenges that I see at the agency so that I wouldn't just hit her on the first day and catch her off guard.

You know, we have a history as an agency of people coming to work at EPA and spending their entire career, as evidenced by the 10 employees that have been there for 49 years. I don't look for that in the future. You know, there's something that I don't think the private sector has fully grappled with yet, and I know government hasn't, is how do we deal with the new millennial generation coming up? People who are graduating from college today are not expected to stay in the same job sometimes not even the same profession, their entire career. They're looking at three, four different jobs, careers over their working lifespan.

That runs counter to everything that we know at the agency. You know, we have EPA managers that have been there for 20, 30 years. They hire somebody new straight out of college and they're thinking in the back of their mind, "This person's going to be here for the next 20 years." And that person's maybe thinking, "I'm going to be here for three to five years." We've got to figure out a way of attracting more people and then retaining them.

And then another thing that the government does not do as well as the private sector is on transitioning when people do retire or leave the agency to make sure that there is somebody else trained to take over for them. Oftentimes, we let somebody leave before we even advertise their job so there is no tradeoff of historic information, institutional knowledge before somebody leaves the agency.

That is a problem and that does have my personal attention and I consider it a human capital crisis at the agency right now.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Just one more question on the management of the agency. You were Acting Administrator for several months. Several other top level officials in this administration are serving in an acting capacity. Do you see that as a problem, the difference between being an Acting Administrator versus being Senate confirmed?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: It's a lot nicer being confirmed. And I certainly enjoy being confirmed. You know, I've been confirmed twice. I was confirmed as the Deputy Administrator and then confirmed again as the 15th Administrator. I mean, it's an unavoidable problem. I think the confirmation process has gotten incredibly politicized and

it's almost dysfunctional. I appreciate Leader McConnell moving forward to try to get nominees cleared faster.

The first year, 2017, and Scott Pruitt was confirmed in February/March of 2017. The second EPA career-- not career, I'm sorry, the second EPA person confirmed was not confirmed until November. That has never happened before at the agency. We usually have four or five people confirmed in the first couple of months of a new administration. So our administration went the first year at EPA with only one Senate confirmed person. That's a huge problem.

The head of our emergency response office has been awaiting confirmation now for over 500 days. You know, this is the person in charge of the office that responds when there's a tornado or a flood or a hurricane. And it's a shame. It's almost a crisis that we don't have that person confirmed yet. When there is an emergency anywhere in the country and that person's not on the job to go out there and respond, and he's been held up by the Senate Democrats since last year, and that's a real problem.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Well, we are almost out of time so before I ask my last question, I'd like to just bring to your attention some upcoming events. On June 19th, we have a Newsmaker with House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff. And on June 24th, we have another luncheon with the U.S. Army Secretary, Mark Esper. So please come on back to the Press Club for that. And for you, Administrator Wheeler, we have the highly coveted gift, which I believe falls under the ethics rule--

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I'll have to make sure. It'll go to my chief of staff until we have it cleared by ethics.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Okay. And finally, we have a question. *Forbes* magazine recently reported that the Department of Energy has rebranded fossil fuels as molecules of freedom. Will EPA follow suit?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: We don't brand energy like that. We try to level playing field and not be energy specific. So, that's within the Department of Energy.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Okay, so we won't be seeing a memo?

ADMINISTRATOR WHEELER: I have no memos planned at this point on that topic.

MS. FITZGERALD KODJAK: Thank you very much for being here, Administrator. (Applause) And we are adjourned. Thank you for being here, everybody.

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