Trump Admin. Blocked Toxic Chemicals Study Fearing ‘Public Relations Nightmare’

Officials with the White House and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tried to block a critical report on a class of toxic chemicals after a White House aide warned that a "public relations nightmare" would follow after its release, according to emails reported by POLITICO on Monday.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)—a unit within the Department of Health and Human Services—was poised to release a report on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) polluting water supplies in sites around the country, including chemical plants and military bases.

The ATSDR draft assessment on PFAS chemicals concludes that they "pose a danger to human health at a far lower level than EPA has previously said was safe." The ATSDR recommends a safety level for PFAS exposure in drinking water that's six times lower than the EPA's current recommendations.

"The public, media and Congressional reaction to these new numbers is going to be huge," the unidentified Trump aide wrote in an email obtained by the Union of Concerned Scientists through the Freedom of Information Act.

"The impact to EPA and [Department of Defense] is going to be extremely painful. We [DoD and EPA] cannot seem to get ATSDR to realize the potential public relations nightmare this is going to be."
The email from the unidentified aide was forwarded on Jan. 30 by James Herz, a political appointee who oversees environmental issues at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

In another email on Jan. 30, Nancy Beck, a former chemical industry lobbyist who now heads the EPA's chemical safety office, suggested that the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs "can step up and coordinate interagency review" of the ATSDR study.

POLITICO noted that the draft study remains unpublished more than three months later.

PFAS are man-made chemicals used in products such as non-stick cookware, water-repellent clothing, stain resistant fabrics and carpets. These substances are persistent, resist degradation in the environment and can bioaccumulate, meaning their concentration in bodies can increase over time.

Exposure to PFAS is a major public health concern. According to the Environmental Working Group, the chemicals have been linked to several types of cancer, thyroid disease weakened childhood immunity and other health problems. They contaminate drinking water systems serving 16 million Americans in 33 states, including military bases and chemical-manufacturing plants nationwide.

As POLITICO pointed out, the ATSDR document could lead to significant cleanup costs at these sites. "Some of the biggest liabilities reside with the Defense Department, which used foam containing the chemicals in exercises at bases across the country. In a March report to Congress, the Defense Department listed 126 facilities where tests of nearby water supplies showed the substances exceeded the current safety guidelines," the publication reported.

In response to the revelations, Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH) sent a letter to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee asking it to investigate and hold hearings.

"Congress must hold hearings and investigate how it is possible that the EPA, the White House, and HHS have, for months, possessed research that could have helped families understand the health impacts of their exposure to toxic chemicals, but instead, have failed to even tell anyone that this study exists at all," Shea-Porter said in a statement.

"Unlike Scott Pruitt's Pollution Protection Agency, there is still one government agency clearly trying to safeguard the public from these dangerous chemicals," said Environmental Working Group president Ken Cook in a statement. "Only Scott Pruitt and the Trump administration would consider reducing drinking water contamination for the American people to be a 'nightmare.'"