



The Washington Post

The Post's View

Opinion: Glenn Youngkin is no moderate on the environment

By Editorial Board

January 9 at 1:52 p.m. EST

Glenn Youngkin, Virginia's governor-elect, campaigned as a practical, no-nonsense business executive. But on at least one crucial set of issues — energy and the environment — the Republican is preparing to govern in a manner far out of step with the moderate state he will soon lead.

Last month, Mr. Youngkin [announced](#) he would pull Virginia out of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, an emissions-cutting pact among Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states, in defiance of common sense and, perhaps, state law. Then, last Wednesday, the governor-elect [nominated Andrew Wheeler](#), a former Trump Environmental Protection Agency chief and onetime coal lobbyist, to be the state's secretary of natural resources.

Confirmation fights are rare in Virginia; the legislature tends to allow governors to staff their administrations as they choose. The General Assembly has not refused to confirm a governor's nominee in 16 years. In general, this is a sound practice. But Mr. Wheeler's nomination is a thumb in the eye of anyone who cares about climate change or practically any other environmental issue, and Democrats should be outraged.

During his time leading the EPA, Mr. Wheeler was the ultimate fox-guarding-the-henhouse figure, helping President Donald Trump roll back about 100 environmental rules addressing an astonishing variety of problems, according to [a New York Times count](#). His [first major act](#) was relaxing standards for handling toxic coal ash, to industry cheers.

He **gutted** a policy designed to transition the country off pollution-spewing coal power plants. He **anceled** efforts to regulate perchlorate, a chemical that damages babies' brains, in drinking water. He **slow-walked** the replacement of lead pipes. He **ripped up rules** to stop the nation's least responsible oil and gas drillers from pumping massive amounts of methane into the air. Perhaps his most egregious move was **barring** the EPA from considering a vast amount of peer-reviewed scientific evidence, hobbling the agency's ability to make fact-based decisions about the nation's air and water.

Virginia has a strong climate law in place, aiming to eliminate by mid-century planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions from the state's electricity sector. This big transition will require a sustained effort over decades. Democrats worry, with reason, that Mr. Wheeler will do all he can to undermine and delay the law's implementation, not to mention the other environmental issues to which he may apply his poor judgment. That may be what Mr. Youngkin wants. In his statement announcing Mr. Wheeler's nomination, the governor-elect **insisted** that Virginia "needs a diverse energy portfolio," signaling a desire to preserve fossil fuels in the energy mix despite their environmental drawbacks. But this is not the future that state law envisions, nor should it be. Neither Virginia nor the rest of the nation can stop using fossil fuels tomorrow. But it should be every state official's goal to cut polluting fuels as fast as practicable.

Mr. Youngkin should find a better steward of Virginia's environment.