

# Union joins fight against Trump-era EPA boss

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01/21/2022 01:38 PM EST

EPA's largest union has weighed in against its former boss, Andrew Wheeler, the agency's Trump-era administrator, whom Republican Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin has chosen for his Cabinet.

American Federation of Government Employees Council 238, which represents about 7,500 EPA employees, yesterday released a [letter](#) sent to Virginia state senators, calling on them to oppose confirmation of Wheeler for secretary of natural and historic resources.

"At the helm of EPA, Mr. Wheeler abandoned the protection of natural resources and decimated environmental safeguards that keep our communities, our water, and our air healthy and safe," the union said in the letter, urging state senators to reject Wheeler's nomination.

The letter continued, "Stand up for sound science and the enforcement of environmental laws. No one will be more appreciative of your protection of human health and the environment than the people of Virginia."

Marie Owens Powell, AFGE Council 238's president, who signed the letter, said the union wanted to prevent Wheeler from inflicting damage on Virginia's environmental agencies similar to what he had done at EPA.

"It was demoralizing," Powell told E&E News about working at EPA while Wheeler was administrator. "We saw the rollback of environmental protections. We saw the removal of any mention climate change on all of our platforms. We saw the sidelining of sound science."

Mandy Gunasekara, who served at the Trump EPA including as chief of staff, slammed the union's letter, calling it "politically charged" and "full of baseless claims."

"Under Andrew Wheeler's leadership, the quality of our nation's air, land and water improved. He tackled several complex environmental problems that had been bogged down at the agency for decades," she said, citing the example of Superfund cleanups in environmental justice areas during his tenure.

Asked for comment on the letter, Youngkin spokesperson Macaulay Porter pointed to an interview the governor did last week with Richmond television station WTVR in which he defended Wheeler and said, "I believe that he will in fact be confirmed."

"He is the most qualified person for this job," he said. "And I get frustrated, because this is all the result of partisan politics. And in fact, what voters said in November is, 'We're tired of hearing people judge one another based on whose team they were on, and in fact, we're ready to talk about capabilities and talents,' and that's what's happening right now."

Wheeler, a former energy lobbyist and top Senate aide, was confirmed as EPA's deputy administrator in 2018 and then took charge of the agency on an acting basis that same year when Scott Pruitt stepped down under a crush of ethics troubles. Wheeler later was confirmed as EPA administrator in 2019.

As head of the agency, Wheeler did not garner as much attention as Pruitt did, but he carried on with his predecessor's deregulatory push. Wheeler targeted air, climate and water rules at EPA, with much of that work now being reversed by the Biden administration.

Wheeler also had his battles with AFGE Council 238.

During Wheeler's tenure leading the agency, EPA imposed a contract on the union's bargaining unit employees that reduced telework, restricted the grievance process and forced union officials out of agency office space. Wheeler also was the subject

of [unfair labor practice complaints](#) filed by the union for allegedly lying about their contract negotiations ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 7, 2021).

Wheeler left EPA at the end of the Trump administration and had kept a relatively low profile over the past year.

Yet Youngkin's picking Wheeler to join his Cabinet has reignited the passions over Trump's environmental policies, with green organizations lobbying against Wheeler's confirmation in Virginia. Also, like the union, 158 former EPA employees sent a [letter](#) last week to Virginia's state senators in opposition to Wheeler's nomination ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 14).

Wheeler is likely to have a tight confirmation fight for the secretary position.

More than a dozen Democrats in the Old Dominion's Senate have publicly said they plan to vote against Wheeler or have major concerns about his nomination. The party holds a slim 21 to 19 majority, so it could sink his confirmation if all Democrats vote against him.

"I've talked to Mr. Wheeler on the phone, and I've talked to him in person, and he has pushed back on nearly every argument that's made against him. I told him that I don't think there's much chance of him getting any Democratic votes in the state Senate to be elected to this position," state Sen. Creigh Deeds said at a virtual event this week hosted by the Virginia League of Conservation Voters, alongside state Sens. Ghazala Hashmi and Dave Marsden, who also oppose Wheeler.

Deeds chairs the Privileges and Elections Committee, which is responsible for reviewing the governor's Cabinet picks.

"One way or another, I don't expect this nomination to go forward," Deeds continued.

Powell said she was surprised that Wheeler was nominated and hopes those with the power to stop his confirmation will do so.

"I'm surprised anyone could look at his track record at EPA and think that's a good idea for Virginia," Powell said.