

Paper Pushing, Tree Hugging and Dividing Loyalties: EPA Workers' Response to Political and Social Climates

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This thesis aims to get a ground level perspective on environmental protection and the role that political and social realities play in the implementation of environmental regulation. My project focuses on EPA employees in Region 1—which encompasses New England—and seeks to understand what motivates EPA employees and how they respond to both to the agency's bureaucracy and the prevailing political and social climate. This paper also investigates how political pressure is manifested on a regional level and how regional employees respond to controversial decisions made at headquarters. Employees in a regional office may not feel much overt political pressure, but they are certainly impacted by the administration's decisions and official stances. They may find their environmental feelings—or their work—conflict with decisions at headquarters. The question, then, becomes, do EPA employees ever feel any contradictions between their work and their ideals? And if so, how do they reconcile this? Are they as satisfied with their work as when they began? Do they feel the agency is heading in the correct direction? EPA employees are devoted and committed. In the course of any given day, they must respond to a multitude of political, legal and institutional incentives. By allowing them to speak for themselves, I hope to gain a fuller understanding into both the motivations and obstacles experienced by Region 1 EPA employees, which will provide insight into the ground-level workings of an agency enmeshed in controversy.

For my research, I interviewed 23 Region 1 employees involved in a variety of different offices and positions. Their job titles ranged from attorney to environmental scientists to public affairs specialist to emergency responder. Generally, eight of the respondents were scientists or engineers, five were attorneys, five were generalists/support staff, three were managers and two were emergency responders. Most of the respondents were career EPA employees, and of those who were less veteran many seemed content to stay at EPA for their entire careers. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions such as: Would you consider yourself an environmentalist? Are you more or less satisfied with your work than when you began? In writing this paper, responses were compiled and compared, aiding in finding common themes among the different interviews.

In general, my argument breaks fairly neatly into four different segments. The first two are concerned with employees' response to social environments and include discussion of EPA employees' motivation and their differing loyalties. The third and fourth segments concern obstacles EPA employees face, including bureaucratic and funding problems as well as the omnipresent concern over politics.

All EPA employees I spoke with chose to work at EPA out of a desire to do good and become a part of an active force in environmental protection. Interestingly enough,

people's paths to EPA corresponded closely with their discipline. Scientists and engineers chose EPA due to unease with environmental consulting; lawyers chose EPA because they wished to do public interest and environmental work; and generalists often found EPA randomly, looking for governmental rather than specifically environmental work. Most of the respondents are career employees, who stay because they love the agency, the people and the work they do. Some respondents, especially those in enforcement, loved the leverage from working in government; others relished the opportunity to interact directly with the community. All employees considered themselves environmentalists, and some remarked that EPA's mission and their values corresponded nicely.

Employees' responses reveal a variety of different tensions operating in EPA, at both agency-wide and personal levels. As an agency, EPA must act as a buffer or mediator between industry and environmental groups and must be careful to take neither too radical nor too conservative a position. Employees then must face the reality that EPA may not be as proactive as they feel is prudent. Consequently regional employees may feel upset over actions and decisions at headquarters—dividing their loyalties between EPA on a regional and national level—and correspondingly they may be enthused by the prospect of states or environmental groups suing EPA. Respondents also disagreed among themselves about the mission and politics of EPA. Some felt EPA's mission was limited to statutes, others felt it went beyond them; some felt George W. Bush was their ultimate boss, others disagreed wholeheartedly. Tensions also arose when respondents faced unfavorable reactions to EPA. Although this occurrence was rare, it forced respondents to divide loyalty between their personal feelings and their work. One respondent told a story of defending EPA to her college-aged son. Many of the tensions EPA employees feel stem from the fact that EPA as an agency and Region 1 as a branch must please many masters, including, states, headquarters, the current administration and the American public.

In the course of conversations, respondents commented on a number of obstacles that they encountered daily as part of their jobs. These obstacles included minimal funding, intense bureaucratic red-tape, a slow work pace and a lack of rewards (especially for initiative-taking). While these obstacles all acted as stressors, they were also seen as a normal part of working for a large government bureaucracy. The severity of these obstacles had the potential to change based on the presidential administration, the regional administrator, the organization of the office and the workings of a specific boss. Though these obstacles could be related to politics, they were not considered to be political in nature. They were viewed at worst as an annoyance and mostly just seen as a part of the federal bureaucracy experience.

While overt political interference was found to be negligible on the regional level, employees certainly still felt impacted by national politics. Regional employees felt the indirect effects of politics and headquarters' decisions through changes in funding and priorities. In addition, the politics and political interference at EPA—even experienced from a distance—were potent enough to cause decreases in regional employees' morale. Regional employees, though, have a number of methods to cope with a poor atmosphere

for environmental protection. They may focus harder on what their job allows them to do, use their job's leverage and their expertise to pursue their own projects or even volunteer their time outside of the agency. Most importantly, despite temporary discomfort, veteran employees understand that they can outlast any political regime, no matter how unpleasant. Although anxious about the state of the economy, employees were uniformly excited about the Obama administration and the prospects for EPA and environmental protection under a democratic administration.

In his resignation letter, Eric Schaeffer, explained to then Administrator of EPA, Carole Browner, that if violators are brought into compliance, "you will prove to EPA's staff that their faith in the Agency's mission is not in vain" (Schaeffer 2002). The results of this study show that he might have also included that their faith in the *agency itself* is not in vain, as many respondents I spoke with had lost faith in the judgment of headquarters and the Bush administration (while retaining their commitment to their personal work and the region). Obama has promised to return science to its rightful place and has already prioritized the environment in his decision-making (Obama 2009). Anticipating this regime, employees experienced a resurgence of hope—bolstered by the feeling that the new administration will finally support and celebrate the work EPA does. Yet even this excitement was tempered with concern about the economic situation and the increasing scale and complexity of environmental problems. EPA must see the coming years of a democratic regime as an opportunity. Rather than dwell on the difficulties—previous interference, complex issues, budgetary problems, scientific illiteracy—EPA must be simultaneously proactive in its work and its public engagement. Though obstacles remain, now is the time for EPA to assert its presence and make known the good it does for the country.