



AFGE Council 238

January 19, 2022

Virginia General Assembly
Pocahontas State Office Building
900 East Main Street
Richmond, VA

Dear Majority Leader Richard L. Saslaw, Minority Leader Thomas K. Norment, Jr., and Honorable Members of the Virginia Senate:

AFGE Council 238, a union of 7,500 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) employees across the nation, urges you, and the people of Virginia, to reject Andrew Wheeler as Secretary of the Virginia Department of Natural and Historic Resources (VDNHR), and take a stand to ensure a safer, healthier, and more prosperous future for all Virginians.

There are few who understand more acutely the threat Mr. Wheeler poses to VDNHR and the natural environment that Virginians cherish than those of us who saw first-hand the impact of Mr. Wheeler's misguided leadership at the EPA. During the Trump Administration, we endured two years of Mr. Wheeler's efforts to destroy our Agency from within as EPA Administrator. 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. We believe he will do so again if you confirm his nomination as the leader of VDNHR.

Mr. Wheeler destroyed or weakened dozens of environmental safeguards at EPA, with the sole intention of bolstering polluting industries' profit margins. He approved regulations that weakened greenhouse gas standards for power plants, cars, and oil and gas producers. He fundamentally undermined the EPA's ability to write environmental rules that address threats in the future, like PFAS chemical contamination. He dramatically reduced EPA staffing while establishing a hostile work culture, and rejected the sound scientific principles supporting the mission of the Agency. As a result of his leadership, millions of Americans were drinking contaminated water and breathing dirtier air, and were at risk of suffering from serious health repercussions.

As you know, Federal law created a system of environmental protection based on the principle of cooperative federalism. And so, today more than ever, the safeguarding of our health and natural resources depends on robust state and Tribal programs as well as a fully functioning Federal EPA.

The contribution to environmental protection by VDNHR scientists and engineers is the reason why the air you breathe and the water you drink is cleaner now for Virginians than at any previous point in their lifetimes. And the work that they have done is not finished. The gains achieved in the last 50 years must be protected, while new challenges, like the climate emergency, must be met by the state in partnership with EPA.

Let us be clear: VDNHR workers will always do their best to protect human health and the environment. EPA could not function without the commitment and professionalism that state agency workers bring to the job every day. Their work will be attacked by Mr. Wheeler, who will stymie the great progress that VDNHR employees have already made in cleaning up your state.

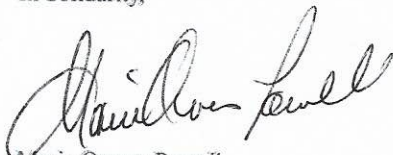
We are convinced that Wheeler will once again attempt to remove key science advisors, documents and technical reports from use. He will work to repeal many of the commonsense rules that protect Virginia's public health and safety. He will provide industry with more ways to dump pollutants into your state's air and water. That is why the Virginia Senate must do its part by rejecting Wheeler and approving a Secretary that will truly support the state's scientists and communities.

We survived Mr. Wheeler's tenure at EPA. Now we have been tasked to reverse Mr. Wheeler's damaging legacy, and to lead our Agency into a new era, with a new administration that deeply values what we do: protecting human health and the environment.

Since the start of the Biden Administration, we have re-dedicated ourselves to the mission of EPA, using the lens of environmental justice. We have renewed our focus on the climate emergency, once again eager to take on the most important existential crisis of our generation. And we are demonstrating to the nation that a higher level of productivity is achievable (even during the pandemic) while maintaining a work-life balance that supports our families.

We urge you to oppose Mr. Wheeler's nomination, protect the VDNHR workforce, and prevent four years of dirtier air and water. 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.

In Solidarity,



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President
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