

E.P.A. Places the Head of Its Office of Children's Health on Leave

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday placed the head of its Office of Children's Health Protection on administrative leave, an unusual move that appeared to reflect an effort to minimize the role of the office.

Dr. Ruth Etzel, a pediatrician and epidemiologist who has been a leader in children's environmental health for 30 years, joined the E.P.A. in 2015 after having served as a senior officer for environmental health research at the World Health Organization. She was placed on administrative leave late Tuesday and asked to hand over her badge, keys and cellphone, according to an E.P.A. official familiar with the decision who was not authorized to discuss the move and who asked not to be identified.

The official said Dr. Etzel was not facing disciplinary action and would continue to receive pay and benefits. No explanation was offered to the staff on Tuesday.

An E.P.A. spokesman, John Konkus, declined to give a reason for the administrative leave.

Four people within the E.P.A. and a dozen or so who work closely with the agency said that Dr. Etzel's dismissal was one of several recent developments that have slowed the work of her department, the Office of Children's Health Protection. Created by President Bill Clinton in 1997, it advises the E.P.A. leadership on the specific health and environmental-protection needs of children, which often leads to tougher or more stringent regulatory standards than those that might be required for adults.

That is because children can be more vulnerable than adults to pollutants or chemicals because their bodies are still developing and because they eat, drink and breathe more, relative to their size. In addition, some of their behaviors, such as crawling or putting things in their mouths, potentially expose them to chemicals or other harmful substances.

As a result, the findings of the office often lead to a push for stronger regulations on industrial pollutants such mercury and pesticides, which are linked to nerve damage in children, and smog, which is linked to increased rates of childhood asthma.

"To take away the badge and access from a top career official and shove them out the door is very rare," said Christine Todd Whitman, who headed the E.P.A. under President George W. Bush. "If they're not saying why they dismissed her, it creates the impression that it's about the policies she worked on." She described the children's health office at the E.P.A. as "critical to the health of the future."

Public health experts said that, since the start of the Trump administration, they had seen a clash between the E.P.A.'s top leadership, appointed by a president who has pushed for weakening environmental rules, and the children's health office. The E.P.A. has reduced

the size of other offices with mandates that sometimes clash with Mr. Trump's anti-regulatory agenda, such as the Office of Environmental Justice, which is charged in part with protecting poor and minority populations from the health effects of pollution.

Mr. Konkus said that no such agenda was in play with the reduction in size and leadership of those offices.

"These offices will continue to be a part of headquarters and regional organizations," he said in a statement. "Children's health is and has always been a top priority for the Trump Administration and the E.P.A. in particular is focused on reducing lead exposure in schools, providing funds for a cleaner school bus fleet, and cleaning up toxic sites so that children have safe environments to learn and play," the statement said.

As the Trump administration has pushed to weaken or roll back regulations on various pollutants, senior officials within the E.P.A. children's office say some of their work has been sidelined. The E.P.A. official who described Dr. Etzel's departure cited a proposal outlining a strategy for reducing childhood lead exposure, which had been in development for more than a year with the involvement of 17 federal agencies. That proposal been stalled since early July, the official said.

The children's health office has also repeatedly objected to a proposal by senior E.P.A. officials to weaken a set of chemical safety standards for children put in place under the Obama administration. The standard bars farm workers under the age of 18 from applying the most toxic pesticides to fruits and vegetables.

After pesticide manufacturers protested that standard, the E.P.A.'s office of chemical regulation, led by a former lobbyist for the chemical industry, Nancy Beck, sought to eliminate it. Dr. Etzel refused to concur with that plan, according to people familiar with the process.

"This office is always placed in the position of arguing for stricter standards, because their whole raison d'être is that you need stricter standards to protect children's health. For that reason, the various polluting industries just hate this office," said Dr. Philip J. Landrigan, a pediatrician and epidemiologist who directs the Global Observatory on Pollution and Health at Boston College. "I see the placing of her on administrative leave as the opening gambit on dismantling the entire office."

The American Academy of Pediatrics called for Dr. Etzel's reinstatement and for the office to continue its mission "unimpeded." Slowing or interrupting the office's work "sends a dangerous message that children's needs are not valued," said Mark Del Monte, interim executive vice president of the academy, in a statement.

Experts praised Dr. Etzel as a star in her field. "This seems like a sneaky way for the E.P.A. to get rid of this program and not be upfront about it," said Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the

director of the pediatric residency program at Hurley Medical Center, a teaching hospital affiliated with Michigan State University. Her analysis of blood tests in Flint, Mich., a community that became caught up in a lead crisis affecting its drinking water, played a key role in showing that residents were being poisoned by the lead. Dr. Hanna-Atisha called Dr. Etzel “an international leader in children’s health.”

The office Dr. Etzel oversees is small, with a budget of about \$2 million and 15 full-time employees in Washington and 10 regional children’s health coordinators, some of whom have other responsibilities in addition to children’s health. However, it operates from an influential position: It is technically housed in the office of the E.P.A.’s top administrator, currently Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist who has served as [the agency’s acting administrator since July](#).

It is not the only E.P.A. office to have lost leadership or personnel under the Trump administration. Officials in the E.P.A. employees’ union say that while the Trump administration has not closed major offices, it has drained them of staff or leaders.

Over the past two years, the E.P.A.’s Office of Environmental Compliance and Enforcement, which oversees the enforcement of regulations, dropped from about 252 employees to about 182, according to records kept by officials in the E.P.A. employees’ union. “They’re finding these other ways to hamper the work,” said Nicole Cantello, who heads the E.P.A. employee union in the agency’s Chicago office.

Shortly after Mr. Trump took office, his budget director, Mick Mulvaney, proposed eliminating the EPA’s 24-year-old environmental justice office, which was created under the Clinton administration to coordinate the agency’s efforts to address [disproportionately high pollution rates in communities of color](#). The reorganization, and a related plan to reduce funding for other civil rights programs, was part of a coordinated effort within the administration to implement a checklist, created by the conservative Heritage Foundation, [that would eliminate or weaken dozens of civil rights and consumer enforcement programs](#) that had been strengthened during the Obama administration.

Funding for the office was restored by the Senate. But the career E.P.A. official who ran the office from its inception, Mustafa Ali, [resigned to protest](#) the administration’s attempts to sideline his program.

Sharon Wolff
Legislative Analyst
Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services
507 F St.
Eureka, CA 95501
swolff@co.humboldt.ca.us
(707)441-5405

