

Dismantling of EPA's Scientific Research Arm Fulfills Key Chemical Industry Goal

Companies feared rules and lawsuits based on the Office of Research and Development's assessments of the dangers of formaldehyde, ethylene oxide and other substances.

By [Marianne Lavelle](#) July 21, 2025

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Soon after President Donald Trump took office in January, a wide array of petrochemical, mining and farm industry coalitions ramped up what has been a long campaign to limit use of the Environmental Protection Agency's assessments of the health risks of chemicals.

That effort scored a significant victory Friday when EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin announced his decision to dismantle the agency's Office of Research and Development (ORD).

The industry lobbyists didn't ask for hundreds of ORD staff members to be laid off or reassigned. But the elimination of the agency's scientific research arm goes a long way toward achieving the goal they sought.

In [a January 27 letter](#) to Zeldin organized by the American Chemistry Council, **more than 80 industry groups—including leading oil, refining and mining associations—asked him to end regulators' reliance on ORD assessments of the risks that chemicals pose for human health.**

The future of that research, conducted under EPA's Integrated Risk Information System program, or IRIS, is now uncertain.

"EPA's IRIS program within ORD has a troubling history of being out of step with the best available science and methods, lacking transparency, and being unresponsive to peer review and stakeholder recommendations," said an American Chemistry Council spokesperson in an email when asked about the decision to eliminate ORD. "This results in IRIS assessments that

jeopardize access to critical chemistries, undercut national priorities, and harm American competitiveness.”

The spokesperson said the organization supports EPA evaluating its resources to ensure tax dollars are being used efficiently and effectively.

H. Christopher Frey, an associate dean at North Carolina State University who served as EPA assistant administrator in charge of ORD during the Biden administration, defended the quality of the science done by the office, which he said is “the poster case study of what it means to do science that’s subject to intense scrutiny.”

“There’s industry with a tremendous vested interest in the policy decisions that might occur later on,” based on the assessments made by ORD. “What the industry does is try to engage in a proxy war over the policy by attacking the science.”

Among the IRIS assessments that stirred the most industry concern were those outlining the dangers of formaldehyde, ethylene oxide, arsenic and hexavalent chromium. Regulatory actions had begun or were looming on all during the Biden administration.

The Biden administration also launched a lawsuit against a LaPlace, Louisiana, plant that had been the only U.S. manufacturer of neoprene, Denka Performance Elastomer, based in part on the IRIS assessment of one of its air pollutants, chloroprene, as a likely human carcinogen. Denka, a spinoff of DuPont, announced it was [ceasing production](#) in May because of the cost of pollution controls.

Public health advocates charge that eliminating the IRIS program, or shifting its functions to other offices in the agency, will rob the EPA of the independent expertise to inform its mission of protection.

“They’ve been trying for years to shut down IRIS,” said Darya Minovi, a senior analyst with the Union of Concerned Scientists and lead author of [a new study](#) on Trump administration actions that the group says undermine science. “The reason why is because when IRIS conducts its independent scientific assessments using a great amount of rigor ... you get stronger regulations, and that is not in the best interest of the big business polluters and those who have a financial stake in the EPA’s demise.”

The UCS report tallied more than 400 firings, funding cuts and other attacks on science in the first six months of the Trump administration, resulting in 54 percent fewer grants for research on topics including cancer, infectious disease and environmental health.

EPA’s press office did not respond to a query on whether the IRIS controversy helped inform Zeldin’s decision to eliminate ORD, which had been anticipated since staff were informed of the potential plan at a meeting in March. In the agency’s official announcement Friday afternoon,

Zeldin said the elimination of the office was part of “organizational improvements” that would deliver \$748.8 million in savings to taxpayers. The reduction in force, combined with previous departures and layoffs, have reduced the agency’s workforce by 23 percent, to 12,448, the EPA said.

With the cuts, the EPA’s workforce will be at its lowest level since [fiscal year 1986](#).

“Under President Trump’s leadership, EPA has taken a close look at our operations to ensure the agency is better equipped than ever to deliver on our core mission of protecting human health and the environment while Powering the Great American Comeback,” Zeldin said in the prepared statement. “This reduction in force will ensure we can better fulfill that mission while being responsible stewards of your hard-earned tax dollars.”

The agency will be creating a new Office of Applied Science and Environmental Solutions; a [report by E&E News](#) said an internal memo indicated the new office would be much smaller than ORD, and would focus on coastal areas, drinking water safety and methodologies for assessing environmental contamination.

Zeldin’s announcement also said that scientific expertise and research efforts will be moved to “program offices”—for example, those concerned with air pollution, water pollution or waste—to tackle “statutory obligations and mission essential functions.” That phrase has a particular meaning: The chemical industry has long complained that Congress never passed a law creating IRIS. Congress did, however, pass many laws requiring that the agency carry out its actions based on the best available science, and [the IRIS program, established during President Ronald Reagan’s administration, was how the agency has carried out the task of assessing the science on chemicals since 1985.](#)

Justin Chen, president of the American Federation of Government Employees Council 238, the union representing 8,000 EPA workers nationwide, said the organizational structure of ORD put barriers between the agency’s researchers and the agency’s political decision-making, enforcement and regulatory teams—even though they all used ORD’s work.

“For them to function properly, they have to have a fair amount of distance away from political interference, in order to let the science guide and develop the kind of things that they do,” Chen said.

“They’re a particular bugbear for a lot of the industries which are heavy donors to the Trump administration and to the right wing,” Chen said. “They’re the ones, I believe, who do all the testing that actually factors into the calculation of risk.”

ORD also was responsible for regularly doing assessments that the Clean Air Act requires on pollutants like ozone and particulate matter, which result from the combustion of fossil fuels.

Frey said a tremendous amount of ORD work has gone into ozone, which is the result of complex interactions of precursor pollutants in the atmosphere. The [open source computer modeling](#) on ozone transport, developed by ORD researchers, helps inform decision-makers grappling with how to address smog around the country. The Biden administration finalized stricter standards for particulate matter in its final year based on ORD's risk assessment, and the Trump administration is now undoing those rules.

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