

EPA now requires political aide's sign-off for agency awards, grant applications

By **Juliet Eilperin** September 4 at 8:08 PM

The Environmental Protection Agency has taken the unusual step of putting a political operative in charge of vetting the hundreds of millions of dollars in grants the EPA distributes annually, assigning final funding decisions to a former Trump campaign aide with little environmental policy experience.

In this role, John Konkus reviews every award the agency gives out, along with every grant solicitation before it is issued. According to both career and political employees, Konkus has told staff that he is on the lookout for “the double C-word” — climate change — and repeatedly has instructed grant officers to eliminate references to the subject in solicitations.

Konkus, who officially works in the EPA's public affairs office, has canceled close to \$2 million competitively

awarded to universities and nonprofit organizations. Although his review has primarily affected Obama administration priorities, it is the heavily Republican state of Alaska that has undergone the most scrutiny so far.

EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman said that grant decisions “are to ensure funding is in line with the Agency’s mission and policy priorities,” with the number of awards denied amounting to just 1 percent of those made since EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt took office. “We review grants to see if they are providing tangible results to the American people,” she said in an email.

But the agency’s new system has raised concerns among career officials and outside experts, as well as questions among some in Congress that the EPA grant program is being politicized at the expense of their states.

Earlier this summer, on the same day that Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska joined with two other Republicans in voting down a GOP health-care bill, EPA staffers were instructed without any explanation to halt all grants to the regional office that covers Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Idaho. That hold was quickly narrowed just to Alaska and remained in place for nearly two weeks.

The ideological shift is a clear break from the practices of previous Republican and Democratic administrations. It bears the hallmarks not just of Pruitt’s tenure but of President Trump’s, reflecting skepticism of climate science, advocacy groups and academia.

Although the EPA has taken the most systematic approach to scrutinizing the flow of money, it is not the only entity to do so. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has vowed to withhold Justice Department grants from “sanctuary cities” that refuse to hand over arrested immigrants who cannot prove they are in the country legally. The Interior Department, which is conducting a review of its grants, last month canceled a \$100,000 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine study aimed at evaluating the impact of surface mining on nearby communities.

Yet several officials from the Obama and George W. Bush administrations said they had never heard of a public affairs officer scrutinizing EPA’s solicitations and its grants, which account for half of the agency’s roughly \$8 billion budget.

“We didn’t do a political screening on every grant, because many of them were based on science, and political appointees don’t have that kind of background,” said former EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman, who served under Bush. She said she couldn’t recall a time when that administration’s political appointees weighed in on a given award.

Konkus is a longtime Republican operative from Florida who served as Trump’s Leon County campaign chairman and previously worked for the state’s lieutenant governor and as a political consultant. From 2000 to 2006, he was an executive assistant, primarily on scheduling and organizational matters, for then-House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-N.Y.). The panel has oversight of the EPA.

Now, as deputy associate administrator in the EPA’s public affairs office, Konkus helps to publicize the funding of awards and serves more broadly as a grants adviser on policy and management issues.

While most of the internal focus has been on individual grants with a connection to climate change, the decision on July 28 to put a temporary hold on all awards to Alaska attracted broader notice.

Two EPA officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, said the action prompted a consultation with agency lawyers because of its unusual nature. The hold temporarily slowed awarding more than \$10 million in federal funds through half a dozen tribal grants and one to the state’s Department of Conservation.

Bowman said Alaska was not singled out in the review, and aides to Murkowski and Alaska Gov. Bill Walker (I) said they were not aware that any funding was delayed. The Obama administration had identified “combating climate change by limiting pollutants” as one of its priorities for awarding tribal funds, but several of the pending Alaska grants were unrelated to climate change.

Konkus has nixed funding for nearly a half-dozen projects to date, including a Bush-era program to address indoor air pollution, a project to protect watersheds in Central and Eastern Europe, and a one-day training session in Flint, Mich., to help residents eradicate bedbugs.

He allowed a \$300,000 award for a computer system to help implement the Obama administration’s Clean Power Plan after the firm involved told the EPA that it could be used for policies other than climate change, officials said.

E&E News first reported that Konkus was overseeing grant applications but did not describe the criteria he was applying or his specific work on the actual awards.

Bowman said that the agency's approach, which required the development of a new computer-reporting system, has allowed the Trump administration to determine whether decisions made by the previous administration were a wise use of taxpayer money.

"I want to underscore that only a select few have been rescinded," she said in her email, noting that the EPA had given states nearly \$74 million in competitive grants and \$1.7 billion in noncompetitive awards between Feb. 1 and Aug. 22.

But Sen. Thomas R. Carper (Del.), the top Democrat on the Environment and Public Works Committee, sent Pruitt a letter late last month asking that he provide documents outlining which grant programs are now subject to political review, how this deviates from past practice and which grants recommended by career staff have been subsequently declined.

From February through July, Carper noted, EPA grant awards to several Democratic-leaning states — including Delaware, Massachusetts and California — had declined compared with the previous year.

"There could be many reasons for these apparent declines," Carper wrote. Although he added that it warranted attention "in light of the potential that EPA's decision to involve political appointees represents a change in the grant-solicitation process and may be indicative of the politicization of the grant-awarding process."

James L. Connaughton, who was chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality under Bush, said new administrations routinely do "a soup-to-nuts review of the previous administration's programs" and advance their own priorities through funding decisions.

"Some of the efforts might be more transparent than others, but let's not fool ourselves," he added.

Still, Connaughton said it was fair to question a review's outcome. Two of the awards the EPA's leadership rescinded — \$1.1 million to the U.N. Foundation and a nearly \$148,000 award to the nonprofit organization Winrock International — supported the deployment of clean cookstoves in the developing world. The U.N.

Foundation grant grew out of a 15-year-old EPA program with the private sector, which aims to curb the kind of pollution that fuels climate change and disproportionately affects women and children.

The program addressed pollution that enters the air and “affects all of us,” Whitman said. “It was also good for human health in those countries, which we wanted to have stable for national security.”

Bowman said the agency was pulling back grants to international entities that are not “providing results for American taxpayers.”


But several U.S. firms that sell stoves and equipment benefit from the program, countered Radha Muthiah, chief executive of the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves. “It’s a cutting-edge solution to one of the world’s oldest challenges, it’s working, and there is a lot still to be done,” she said in a statement.

The smallest grant revoked so far was a \$20,000 award to the Midwest Pesticide Action Center to train Flint residents on how to combat bedbugs. Executive Director Ruth Kerzee said in an interview that regional EPA officials had urged the center to apply because it had a small amount of unused funds. The group was notified of the award and then told a month later that it was canceled.

Kerzee said bedbug infestations have spread over time in the Michigan city — which has grappled with lead-contaminated drinking water since 2014 — and the center’s past sessions attracted packed audiences. “People really do need this,” she said. “For low-income communities, it’s a really desperate situation.”

Bowman said the cancellation made sense in light of the agency’s overall priorities: “Let’s be clear, we are talking about \$20,000 for a one-day workshop on bedbugs.”

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