



Society of Environmental Journalists

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International Prize 2010

Feb. 3, 2021

Michael Regan, Administrator-Designate
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Mail Code 1101A
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20460
Nishida.Jane@epa.gov

Dear Administrator-Designate Regan,

Congratulations on your appointment as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. We look forward to learning more about your plans and priorities for the agency.

The Society of Environmental Journalists is a professional association of some 1,500 members, most of whom are journalists. Over SEJ's 31-year history, its members have covered EPA through multiple administrations. During some of those years, there has been a healthy flow of information about what EPA is doing. But in other years (the past four being among the worst), the relationship between EPA and journalists has been poor. We are hoping you may help change things for the better.

During the Trump years, the EPA press operation often echoed President Trump's antagonism against the media as an "enemy." We are calling on President Biden and you as Administrator to commit the agency to restoring government openness and transparency, and to respect the vital role that journalists play in our democracy.

We call on EPA to take several key steps to ensure that journalists are able to effectively convey essential information to the public:

- Restore civility, professionalism, openness and truthfulness to the EPA media operation.
- Declare that federal employees—especially scientists—are not only permitted but encouraged to talk directly to reporters — without "minders" or press office permission. Requiring prior press office approval of every interview or query too often leaves journalists on deadline with incomplete or misleading understanding of agency actions.
- Revise the agency's Freedom of Information Act Regulations to ensure that EPA adheres to the letter and the spirit of the law. The previous administration's changes to the rule had the opposite effect. Depoliticize FOIA responses.
- Ensure adequate funding and staffing (as well as administrative mandate) to clear the backlog of FOIA records requests.
- Ensure fairness in media access to EPA information. The press office should not filter media outlets for access according to size,

- platform, status, or ideology. This should include advisories and mailing lists.
- Respond promptly and as forthrightly as possible to media inquiries. Respect deadlines. Provide all relevant information, even that which doesn't necessarily support the agency's policy or stance, so journalists and the public may understand the complexities of some issues.
 - Presume that interactions between journalists and PIOs are on the record by default. Rules of attribution (e.g. "background") should not apply unless and until both parties agree.
 - Avoid vague, anonymous emails and desk statements. Do not require questions to be always by email. Do not try to limit subjects of inquiry (you can always decline comment).
 - Restore the system of headquarters press officers with subject expertise and listed contacts.
 - Distribute all press releases, media advisories, and announcements broadly, to all who request them, and not just to a select audience.
 - Hold open press briefings on significant policy rollouts and regulatory actions. Invite all regular beat reporters to in-person briefings held at EPA headquarters; provide web conferencing and teleconference access for all interested reporters outside the Washington area when the agency action or policy has regional or nationwide scope.
 - Reinstate the practice of publishing and distributing a weekly list of the EPA administrator's scheduled public appearances, so reporters may plan coverage of those that seem newsworthy.
 - Resume the practice of publishing an up-to-date calendar of all the EPA administrator's meetings – not just public events — with staff, stakeholders, elected officials, and other individuals and groups from outside the agency.

For the sake of our democracy, it's time for EPA to help restore government transparency and accountability. We urge you to renew the agency's commitment to the mission of informing the public about what the government is doing to address risks to human health and the environment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sadie Babits".

Sadie Babits, President
Society of Environmental Journalists

cc: Lindsay Hamilton, Associate Administrator for Public Affairs , EPA
Hamilton.Lindsay@epa.gov