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Andrew Wheeler, the acting administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), appeared before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on August 1 to discuss the EPA's priorities going forward under President Donald Trump. Wheeler assumed his current position after Scott Pruitt resigned from his position as EPA Administrator on July 6. During the hearing, Wheeler emphasized the EPA's focus on certainty and transparency, specifically in risk communication, enforcement and regulation, and communications with state and local governments.

During questioning, Wheeler committed to allow experts, such as scientists and professional staff, to give unrestricted information in the EPA decision-making process and to attend policy conferences.

When asked by Senator Shelley Capito (R-WV) to outline his perspectives on the future of the coal industry and its relationship with the environment, Wheeler responded that it is not the role of the EPA to "pick winners and losers" in energy. "It is very important that we don't enact regulations that penalize (or emphasize) one energy source over another," he stated. Wheeler later clarified that a polluting energy source bearing a regulatory burden due to its pollution would not constitute promoting one energy source over another.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) asked why environmental regulation enforcement and fining decreased by 30 percent and 50 percent, respectively, in the first nine months of President Donald Trump's administration compared to those of the Bush administration. Senator Whitehouse related this trend to a 2017 EPA Office of Enforcement and Compliance (OECA) memo requiring headquarters' approval of all information requests proposed by regional EPA agencies, meaning that regional EPA offices would have to obtain approval from the national level before requesting information related to ongoing regulatory investigations. According to Senator Whitehouse, this review requirement "[hinders] the prerogative of the regional agencies on getting information about potential violations." Wheeler responded that he was not aware of the memo or if it is still in effect. However, Wheeler noted that there was no Senate-confirmed head of OECA until December 2017 and posited that as a reason for the lower enforcement and fining rates.

Source: U.S. Senate, Committee on Environment and Public Works.
