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On day twenty-six of the highly contentious partial government shutdown, the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW) moved forward with their confirmation hearing on the nomination of Andrew Wheeler for administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Andrew Wheeler, President Donald Trump's pick to lead EPA, has served as the agency's acting administrator since July 5, 2018, following the resignation of former administrator Scott Pruitt in light of a series of ethics scandals.

Wheeler previously served as a special assistant in EPA's Pollution Prevention and Toxics office and as staff director of the EPW's Clean Air Subcommittee. Chairman John Barrasso (R-WY) noted that, in these and other roles, Wheeler has "spent twenty-five years working in the environmental field," a point that the chairman returned to several times throughout the hearing in support of the nominee. Other committee members, including Wheeler's former boss of over ten years, Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK), stated that Wheeler's extensive experience in the field has given him a "vast wealth of knowledge and expertise on environmental issues," making him more than qualified for the position.

Wheeler's past employment as a fossil fuel industry lobbyist led some to question the suitability of his appointment. Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) claimed that Wheeler's lobbying history represented a conflict of interest in his potential appointment as EPA administrator, as exemplified by his proposal to roll back emission rules for U.S. coal plants. Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) similarly took issue with Wheeler's deregulatory history, and questioned Wheeler's commitment to upholding EPA's mission to protect human and environmental health.

Another cause for concern was the timing of the hearing, which was being conducted while approximately 14,000 EPA officials were furloughed. Senator Tom Carper (D-DE) stressed that the committee's priority should be on reopening the government, rather than carrying out Wheeler's "speedy promotion," as the Federal Vacancies Reform Act states that the nominee may still serve a further 200 days as the acting EPA administrator to President Trump's cabinet.

UPDATE: On February 5, the Environment and Public Works Committee voted 11-10 to advance Wheeler's nomination and send it to the full Senate chamber for further consideration.

Sources: The Hill; U.S. Senate, Committee on Environment and Public Works; The Washington Post.
