

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

2321 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

December 19, 2019

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

(202) 225-6375
www.science.house.gov

Acting Inspector General Charles J. Sheehan
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Inspector General
1200 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Acting Inspector General Sheehan,

I am writing to express my concern about the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) decision to close the Region 6 Houston Laboratory ("Lab" hereinafter) and relocate its employees to Ada, Oklahoma.

On July 12, 2019, my colleagues from the Houston delegation and I sent the attached letter to Administrator Wheeler conveying our dismay about EPA's decision to close the Lab and our concern that this closure will cause the forced retirement of many EPA employees and threaten Houston's access to the critical air, water, and soil testing performed at the Lab. As Houston is home to a large number of chemical plants and refineries, this Lab and its highly trained staff are essential to EPA's mission of protecting human health and the environment.

At the September 19, 2019 Committee on Science, Space, and Technology hearing titled "*Science and Technology at the Environmental Protection Agency*," I asked Administrator Wheeler about the closure of the Lab and when I could expect to receive a response to the July 12 letter. He testified that we would receive a response "as soon as possible."¹ He also assured me that the Houston Lab scientists who are integral to informing the public of water and air quality would not be the ones relocating to Ada, Oklahoma.

To date, my colleagues and I have not received a response from Administrator Wheeler to our July 12 letter. His testimony at the September 19 hearing that the essential scientists would not be relocated was not satisfactory. I remain concerned that this Lab closure, and the loss of expertise it will engender, will have significant impacts on EPA's ability to provide timely and thorough response to all our constituents.

In the case of extreme weather events, such as hurricanes or heavy precipitation which are becoming increasingly frequent, these scientists are among Houston's essential first responders. They inform the public about water and air quality and I am extremely concerned about the loss of their expertise. An audit to investigate the EPA response to Hurricane Harvey published by your office on December 16, 2019 found that EPA needs to improve its emergency response to

¹ <https://science.house.gov/hearings/science-and-technology-at-the-environmental-protection-agency>

air quality concerns during disasters.² The audit also highlighted the successful deployment by the Region 6 Office of more than 80 staffers as community liaisons. These staffers provided important information to the public in areas affected by Harvey as to how to protect themselves. I worry that the closure of the Lab and the loss of important EPA staff will exacerbate the poor emergency response to future, more intense and frequent hurricanes and other disasters.

I am aware that you are conducting an investigation into EPA lab closures; however, the focus of this ongoing investigation is limited to the schedule of lab closures and its scope does not extend to the Houston Lab or the impacts of its closure. I am requesting that you conduct a separate investigation into the effectiveness of closing the Houston Lab and how the results of this decision could impact EPA's ability to carry out its mission and to inform the public about air and water quality in the Houston area, especially before, during, and after extreme weather events.

If your staff has any questions or would like to discuss this request in more detail, please have them contact Priyanka Hooghan or Janie Thompson on our Majority staff at (202) 225-6375.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Lizzie Fletcher

Chair

Subcommittee on Environment

Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

cc: Roger Marshall

Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Environment

Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Attachment

² https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-12/documents/epaig_20191216-20-p-0062.pdf

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 12, 2019

Mr. Andrew Wheeler
Acting Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460

Re: Closure of EPA Region 6 Laboratory in Houston, TX

Dear Administrator Wheeler:

We write to express our dismay that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has proposed the closure of the EPA Region 6 Houston Laboratory ("Lab" hereinafter), a full-service analytical Lab which serves Arizona, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. While the Lab employees have been asked to relocate to Ada, Oklahoma, over the next 18 months, many employees will choose instead to retire rather than relocate because of the hardship this will impose on them. Family obligations, medical needs, and financial responsibilities are all major factors to consider in any relocation. Employees would be forced to uproot their lives to keep their jobs. For many, this may be impossible.

We are concerned that this closure could be perceived as a tactic to shrink the overall number of EPA employees needed to protect human health and the environment. The closing of the Lab in Houston, with its high concentration of chemical plants and refineries, is counterproductive to the EPA's mission.

The proposed closure will result in the forced retirement of many affected EPA employees. The EPA Region 6 employees comprise highly-trained and skilled analytical staff, including chemists, biologists, inspectors, and facility support contractors. The Lab's closure and elimination of many positions, and the expertise they accompany, will create tremendous turnover. Houston, consequently, will lose critical access to test samples of air, water, and soil that require immediate analysis. This could require Houston to outsource its Lab work to entities outside of the federal government.

Federal government laboratories are impartial, apolitical, and non-profit entities. Numerous studies suggest inflated costs of government contractors in comparison to that of federal workers that perform the same work; contractors are typically paid nearly two or three times more than federal workers. A government contractor's allegiance is to their employer and shareholders. EPA

lab employees are dedicated public servants committed to the Agency's mission of protecting public health and the environment. Government contractors who collect data will not necessarily be impartial, which may cause their findings to be less accurate and effective.


For these reasons, we ask that you reconsider the Houston Lab closure as well as the relocation of the facility and its employees to Ada, Oklahoma.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Al Green
Member of Congress



Sylvia R. Garcia
Member of Congress



Lizzie Fletcher
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress