

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

October 11, 2018

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

Dear Acting Administrator Wheeler:

We are writing to express serious concerns and request further information about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s abrupt decision to place Dr. Ruth Etzel on administrative leave from the position of Director of the Office of Children's Health Protection. The EPA has not provided sufficient justification for the dismissal of a senior non-political professional with decades of expertise in protecting children from unsafe exposure to toxins and chemicals, nor has the agency identified a new candidate willing to perform the duties of this office. The Office of Children's Health Protection is critical in an era where toxins in our environment, including lead, mercury, and per/polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), introduce developmental and health barriers to thousands of American youth.

Our home state of Michigan experienced one of the nation's largest man-made environmental disasters with lead-contaminated drinking water in Flint. We heard from thousands of constituents, who were forced to use bottled water to drink, cook and bathe. To this day, many still do not trust the water coming from their faucets. But the most heartbreaking stories were from parents, whose children are facing significant physical, cognitive and developmental challenges from lead exposure. Children are the most vulnerable to the ill effects of lead exposure, and they will experience the longest term impact. Going forward, we need to ensure we have a strong national infrastructure to prevent a scenario like the Flint water crisis from ever happening again, and the Office of Children's Health Protection is key to this strategy.

The Flint water crisis is just one example of how childhood exposure to toxins can undermine the prosperity of an entire community. Children in lower income and minority communities continue to bear most of the health burden from mercury-emitting coal-fired plants. Each day, we also learn more about the chronic health conditions that develop as a result of widespread exposure to PFAS. Further research is needed on the health impacts caused by this class of over 4,700 industrial chemicals, but we already know certain PFAS increase the risk of some cancers, harm the immune and endocrine systems, and negatively affect the growth, learning, and behavior of infants and children.

Based on publicly available facts, Dr. Etzel is well-qualified for the position of Director at the Office of Children's Health Protection. She is a world-renowned pediatrician and epidemiologist with over three decades of experience aligned with the office's mission. Prior to becoming the office's Director in 2015, she served as a senior officer for environmental health research at the World Health Organization and received numerous national awards for her work. Dr. Mona Hannah-Attisha, a pediatrician who played a

central role in elevating the impact of the Flint water crisis on children, describes Dr. Etzel as “an international leader in children’s health.”

The EPA has stated that children’s health remains a top priority for the Administration at the same time it has dismissed, without apparent reason, the head of the office that oversees children’s health. As such, we request the EPA respond to the following requests for information within 30 days:

- What is EPA leadership’s reasoning and justification for Dr. Etzel’s removal?
- Which EPA officials were consulted and ultimately made the decision to place Dr. Etzel on leave?
- How was Dr. Etzel notified of the decision to place her on leave?
- How will this personnel decision impact the EPA’s ability to perform its mission of reducing environmental risk factors for children’s health?
- How many full-time staff have been budgeted within the Office of Children’s Health Protection for Fiscal Year 2017, 2018, and 2019?
- Who is performing the duties of Director of the Office of Children’s Health Protection currently?
- When does EPA intend to hire a new Director for the Office of Children’s Health Protection?
- How long does EPA intend to provide administrative leave and other employment benefits for Dr. Etzel?

It is imperative that the EPA takes every possible step to avoid childhood exposure to unsafe toxins like lead and PFAS and ensure all children are able to grow up happy and healthy. As the federal government works to reduce the unnecessary incidence of asthma, developmental delays, and cancers, the EPA needs to keep a strong focus on the youngest Americans, who are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of environmental toxins. We request more information about a sudden personnel decision that suggests the EPA is not following through with its stated commitment to prioritizing children’s health.

Sincerely,



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Daniel Kildee
Member of Congress