



Society of Environmental Journalists

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April 9, 2013 [Date Corrected]

Sen. Barbara Boxer, Chairman
Environment and Public Works Committee
U.S. Senate

Re: Confirmation Hearing: Openness and Media Access at EPA

Dear Senator Boxer:

With the pending leadership change at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Obama administration has an opportunity to take a major step toward fulfilling its four-year-old pledge to a new era of openness in government.

As you prepare to hold a hearing this week on the nomination of Gina McCarthy to be administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, we must tell you that this agency entrusted with protecting Americans' health and the environment has become noticeably less open in recent years.

Reporters covering issues before the EPA have been routinely denied interviews with agency scientists or other experts on staff. Instead, journalists are required to submit questions by email to the public information office, and what they get in reply are often "talking points" delivered on a "not for attribution" basis, with no one to be named taking responsibility for the statement. In the rare cases when an interview has been granted, public information "minders" are present or on the line monitoring the conversation.

Gina McCarthy's nomination as EPA administrator is a chance for a fresh start. We are troubled, however, by her past statements defending the tight grip of the EPA public affairs office on communications between journalists and the agency's scientists and policymakers.

Last September, at a Union of Concerned Scientists symposium on public access to government scientific information, Ms. McCarthy said the EPA policy of funneling all media requests through its public affairs office was necessary to combat misinformation and defend against political attacks.

"It is the job of the agency to make sure that personalities don't get in the way of really discussing the science in a way that maintains the agency's credibility," she said then. "And that's the balance that we try to bring to it, is to just make sure we are really providing factual information, not a layer of assessment that is based on someone's personal interest or advocacy."

*Strengthening the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media
to advance public understanding of environmental issues*

The EPA's mission statement, posted on its Web site, says the agency's purpose is to ensure that "all parts of society – communities, individuals, businesses, and state, local and tribal governments – have access to accurate information sufficient to effectively participate in managing human health and environmental risks."

We urge you to ask Ms. McCarthy to commit to fulfilling that part of the agency's mission. We hope you ask her to pledge to answer reporters' questions more quickly and directly, without resorting to "talking points" emailed "not for attribution" from the press office.

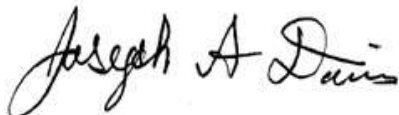
As journalists, we have no political agenda. We are working on behalf of our readers, viewers and listeners to produce timely, accurate and complete reporting on a host of important environmental and health issues - climate change, coal mining, oil and gas development, air and water pollution, toxic substances, and many other topics that are important to the American people. The EPA works for them, too. Shouldn't it have the same goals? It's a question we hope you ask Ms. McCarthy. The answer matters very much, not just for our news coverage of the environment, but for the ability of Americans to make informed choices about the air they breathe, the water they drink and the community in which they live.

Sincerely,

Beth Parke, SEJ Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth Parke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Joseph A. Davis, Director
SEJ Watchdog Project

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph A. Davis". The signature is written in a cursive style.