

WBUR - Fear and low morale at New England EPA office as it loses a quarter of its staff under Trump

September 15, 2025

- Vivian La

Some staffers at the Environmental Protection Agency's regional lab in Chelmsford eat lunch alone more often than they used to, according to their union's leader.

They're worried they may inadvertently say something that could get them into trouble.

"People are super anxious every day," said Lilly Simmons, an environmental scientist and president of AFGE Local 3428, which represents EPA employees in New England. "They're not feeling comfortable in the workplace. They're absolutely not."

The New England branch of the EPA has lost more than 150 employees since the start of the Trump administration's efforts to reduce the agency's workforce, according to union leaders. Current employees said drastic staffing cuts and shifting federal priorities have dampened morale and decreased productivity at the agency.

WBUR spoke to six current and former EPA employees for this report about changes at the office. Most declined to be quoted directly for fear of jeopardizing their positions or future job prospects.

Since February, agency leaders have offered early retirements, laid off staff, [eliminated positions](#) and placed employees on leave for criticizing the administration. Other workers left for other jobs, Simmons and others said.

Nearly a quarter of the EPA's approximately 640 New England office employees in February are now gone. A spokesperson for the agency confirmed the drop in head count.

"We are confident EPA has the resources needed to meet all statutory requirements and fulfill our core mission of protecting human health and the environment," EPA spokesperson Jo Anne Kittrell said in a statement.

In July, agency management placed at least five employees on leave for [signing a letter](#) critical of the Trump administration's environmental policies. The letter said federal leaders were ignoring scientific research, among other concerns.

Officials kept extending the leaves until last week, when some staff workers were accused of conduct “unbecoming of a federal employee” and given just 24 hours to respond, according to emails reviewed by WBUR. Nationally, dozens of employees were suspended or [fired](#) for [signing the letter](#), according to union officials.

Which explains the lonely lunches, according to Simmons.

"Anything you say might be used against you, which is the situation right now," she said. "People were put on administrative leave based on disagreeing with political leaders, so people aren't having conversations."

Federal officials also canceled collectively bargained union contracts last month, including at the EPA, to comply with President Trump’s [executive order](#) excluding many federal employees from unions. He has said the move is necessary to [protect national security](#). The national chapter of AFGE [said](#) it's assessing options to challenge contract terminations and restore unions' rights.

Without a contract that outlines why an employee could get in trouble and what to expect for disciplinary action, Simmons said workers aren't sure how they should respond to allegations of misconduct or how union leadership can help.

Workers in the Boston office have also asked the union about surveys the EPA emailed to employees about voluntary transfers to labs in Chelmsford or Narragansett, Rhode Island. A second survey sent this month said that submitting a response “constitutes a voluntary request to change your official duty station to the lab that you select” but noted that plans were not yet finalized. This left many confused about the agency's future office plans.

When asked if the EPA plans to relocate Boston employees to other locations, an EPA spokesperson wrote that the agency “continuously evaluates how to best utilize our resources throughout the region, which includes our office spaces.”

A [report](#) published this month by the nonprofit Environmental Data & Governance Initiative found that under the current Trump administration, the EPA is at or below its lowest historical staffing levels. The authors estimated that the entire agency’s staff might be reduced by 25-33% by the end of the fiscal year.

“We haven't seen anything this radical really since the agency's founding,” said Chris Sellers, lead author of the report and a history professor at Stony Brook University.

The Trump administration has said these efforts save taxpayer money and make the government more efficient. But Sellers said he's worried the changes have degraded the agency’s ability to enforce environment regulations. That work is typically carried out by regional staff, he said.

“The regions are the enforcers,” he said. “It’s their inspectors that go out, looking at the polluting facilities and assessing for compliance versus violations and so on.”

While current staff at New England EPA are still working to protect the environment, Simmons said the pace of staffing changes makes it hard to work efficiently. The agency was already understaffed prior to this administration.

"In the old days, we would do more with less," she said, but now demoralized staffers are doing "less with less."

“It is classic waste, fraud and abuse," she said.

WBUR reporter Barbara Moran contributed to this report.