

# Science from this Rhode Island EPA lab is used to prevent water pollution. Will Trump close it?

The Narragansett lab tackles emerging water quality problems, including PFAS and microplastics in our water, and toxic algal blooms.

By [Erin Douglas](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 11, 2025, 10:32 a.m.



Researchers pipette samples for PFAS analysis in the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Research and Development lab in Narragansett, R.I. Draft plans for layoffs under President Trump suggested that the agency's research department could be eliminated. EPA

About 30 miles south of Providence, more than 100 scientists and support staff roam a [90,000-square-foot](#) research facility. In bay-side laboratories, they research water quality problems up and down the East Coast.

How much longer they'll do so is anyone's guess. The Environmental Protection Agency lab in Narragansett is part of the agency's Office of Research and Development, which could reportedly be eliminated under President Trump.

Scientists at the Narragansett lab tackle questions such as: How can we prevent people and pets from getting sick from swimming during toxic algal blooms? Just how prevalent are microplastics and PFAS in our drinking water? And, could people be exposed to mercury when they eat locally caught fish?

Cutting this lab and the rest of the agency's research branch could effectively stall or end this type of independent EPA science that is at the heart of the nation's environmental rules, former and current employees and those who have worked with the lab told the Globe.

"When regulations go forward, regulators contact [the Office of Research and Development] and say: 'Does this make sense?'" said Kay Ho, a former environmental research scientist who retired from the EPA Narragansett lab last year. "We would talk about things like: How do you define a microplastic?"

“If you cut off that limb of the EPA, I think you will miss that unbiased answer,” she said.

The Trump administration reportedly plans to “eliminate the Office of Research and Development” and cut between 50 to 70 percent of its staff, according to draft documents reviewed by the staff of a [House Democrat science committee](#).

It’s unclear when that big cut in staff may come, but EPA employees say they’re on edge. In the meantime, Democrats in Congress have protested the possible cut to EPA research.

“We’re dealing with the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events that require scientific inquiry,” said Representative Gabe Amo, who represents parts of Rhode Island’s coast. “I think there are downstream effects that we may not be able to predict.”

In the [Atlantic Coastal Environment Sciences Division](#) Narragansett lab, scientists are focused on solving the nation’s most critical and emerging water pollution problems. Those include algal blooms as well as microplastics and so-called forever chemicals, or PFAS, polluting local watersheds. The research often informs municipal and state environmental work, so scientists from local groups that have worked with the Narragansett lab said they’re concerned about what would be lost.

Courtney Schmidt, a staff scientist for the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, said that EPA research scientists are currently helping to uncover the scale of PFAS pollution in the region.

Exposure to “forever chemicals,” which are commonly used in consumer and industrial products, [poses a risk to human health](#), including cancer risk. In recent years, [scientists have found evidence of PFAS](#) in the water, air, and blood of people and animals.

“We don’t have a baseline yet,” Schmidt said, which makes it difficult for local governments and communities to decide how and where to remove PFAS.

“[EPA studies] provide a lot of the good science that we need in this area,” she said, also noting that the Rhode Island lab has helped organizations like hers understand how local marshes are impacted by nutrient pollution, flooding, and erosion.





EPA's Office of Research and Development lab in Narragansett, R.I. EPA

Trump administration officials have not confirmed any details about their plans for the EPA research department since the possible cuts were [first reported by the New York Times](#) in mid-March. In a [TV interview on Fox Business News](#), EPA administrator Lee Zeldin, who has repeatedly promised to gut EPA spending by more than half, said, “A decision is something that we are working through.”

In a statement to the Globe, EPA spokesperson Molly Vaseliou said “no decisions have been made” about the research department and did not respond to specific questions about the Narragansett facility.

“[The] EPA is taking exciting steps as we enter the next phase of organizational improvements,” Vaseliou said.

Former employees and agency leaders, though, say significant cuts to the research department will undercut the agency’s mission. Chris Frey, a former head of the EPA’s Office of Research and Development under President Biden, said the EPA is required by law to use the best available science to craft regulations.

“That science largely doesn’t exist without agency scientists,” Frey said.

He noted that it’s not something that can be easily replaced by researchers outside the government: “The research done in academia may not be as directly relevant or on the time frame that the agency needs it,” he said.

Current EPA research scientists, who declined to use their names publicly for fear of retaliation by the Trump administration, told the Globe that they’re feeling angry and scared about what will come next. One EPA Office of Research and Development scientist based in New England said that during the first Trump administration, he felt his work was politicized — he and his colleagues were instructed not to publish research that included the words “climate change,” for example.

Now, “it’s far, far, far worse,” he said. “It’s just this assault on the entirety of who we are.”

“We’re looking at our research and stuff that’s near completion, and we’re working really hard to get that out before we are targeted,” said the research scientist.

Wet lab area of the EPA's Office of Research and Development lab in Narragansett, RI. The lab researches water quality problems across the Eastern Seaboard. EPA

There are research scientists and engineers in other branches of the EPA, which the Trump administration has implied could pick up extra slack. However, EPA employees told the Globe that it would be near impossible for those scientists — who are embedded in certain topic areas, including water, air, and chemical safety — to make up the research gaps if the research branch is shuttered.

“We’d risk inefficiencies and possibly duplication of efforts,” said one EPA Office of Research and Development ecologist outside of New England who declined to be named due to fear of retaliation by the Trump administration.

“We need that research to inform decision-making in this country on public health and the environment,” she said. The water quality in the lake near your house and at the beach your kids swim in is influenced by EPA science, she said. “There’s no way around it.”

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