



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, TRUMP EPA WORKED WITH WHITE HOUSE TO HELP POLLUTERS AVOID ENFORCEMENT

Emails obtained by Environmental Defense Fund show close collaboration between EPA political officials and the White House in facilitating requests for Clean Air Act exemptions

In March 2025, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Zeldin launched a [website](#) offering to help industrial sources emit hazardous air pollution instead of complying with existing clean air standards. Since then, President Trump has issued eight proclamations under Clean Air Act Section 112(i)(4) exempting roughly 200 large industrial emitters from hazardous air pollution regulations.

The Trump Administration has summarily granted exemptions despite clear evidence that many of the required controls and practices are already in use. EDF has obtained over 5,000 pages of records under the Freedom of Information Act related to the Trump EPA's actions to exempt industry from these vital limits on toxic air pollution.

The records detailed below underscore how the Trump administration, rather than going through the legally required, comprehensive and public rulemaking process to amend standards for hazardous air pollutants—which would require the agency to justify any change in policy—continues to rely on illegal shortcuts to circumvent crucial public health protections. The Trump EPA and White House continue to issue unprecedented presidential exemptions from existing pollution standards without any opportunity for public comment or any detailed justification, while failing to undergo the process required by law to amend Clean Air Act protections. While the Trump EPA announced in March 2025 that it would be [reconsidering](#) nine National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants (“NESHAPs”), it has largely not done so. The agency has issued proposed rules to amend just two of those nine NESHAPs and has finalized only one rule (which is now being [challenged](#) in court), and one other – the NESHAP for Rubber Tire Manufacturing – was revoked through a Congressional Review Act resolution. But, as demonstrated in the records below, industry continues to request and receive presidential exemptions under Clean Air Act Section 112(i)(4), and the Trump EPA is expanding its efforts to assess additional shortcut pathways to avoid clean air requirements.

You can access the full set of new records [here](#). Citations below are to the page numbers in [this PDF file](#).

Industry has continued submitting applications for exemptions well after EPA's initial deadline, and the Trump administration has continued to issue exemptions.

- While initially presented to the public as a [one-time program with a clear due date of March 31, 2025, for exemption applications](#), the Trump EPA has been accepting requests for pollution exemptions on a rolling basis, opening the door for industrial operators to avoid regulation via the sending of an email anytime.
 - Three coal plants that missed the March 31, 2025 deadline received a dedicated [July 17, 2025](#) proclamation granting them exemptions (see pages 1814, 1861, 1872).
 - EPA Assistant Administrator Aaron Szabo flagged late applications for EPA career staff and appeared to be asking staff to check on late requests. Career staff responded that they would “double check to verify that there are no other unaddressed petitions” from coal plants in late June 2025 (pages 2100-2101).
 - Other late applicants, such as chemical manufacturer Zeon Chemicals, [have also received exemptions](#) (see page 680) and the chemical industry has continued applying for Section 112(i)(4) exemptions into 2026 (see pages 1880 and 1886).
- Industry had advanced knowledge of upcoming new rounds of presidential exemptions and assumed their exemptions would ultimately be granted despite being late.
 - In May 2025, coal-fired power plant operator Santee Cooper emailed EPA political appointees Aaron Szabo and Abigale Tardif, acknowledging the April 8 exemptions from MATS standards and stating, “it is our understanding that additional electric utilities will be afforded the same opportunity to apply for the presidential exemption through a second proclamation that would be issued in the near term” (pages 2108-2109).
 - In July 2025, law firm Van Ness Feldman emailed the same EPA political appointees on behalf of Santee Cooper, asking why the company's exemption request had not yet been granted, “Assuming that this may have been an oversight” (page 2108).
 - Freeport-McMoRan Miami Inc., the operator of a copper smelter that is one of the country's [largest sources of lead pollution](#), similarly lobbied extensively for a presidential exemption. In March 2025, law firm Vinson & Elkins emailed EPA Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator Abigale Tardif requesting information on the presidential exemption process and asking for a call, on behalf of Freeport-McMoRan. Tardif informed Freeport's lawyer that EPA's forthcoming exemption process would go live that day and endorsed the format of Freeport's planned exemption request (see pages 1835 to 1838).
 - The National Mining Association, an industry group, also lobbied the White House directly for an exemption for Freeport. In August 2025, a National Mining Association executive emailed David Copley, a staffer on the White House's National Security Council and a [former executive](#) for the mining companies Newmont Corporation and U.S. Silica: “Just a reminder that Freeport-McMoRan Miami Inc. still needs a POTUS extension that will allow for reinvestment in their copper smelting plant” (pages 2098-2099). A little over two months later, [Freeport received its exemption](#).

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EPA political appointees regularly assert that all presidential exemptions are handled by the White House, but EPA continues to be extensively involved.

- Across multiple emails, Trump EPA officials claim that they are not involved in exemption decisions.
 - Officials told reporters on background that “**EPA played no role** in the determination set out in the statute and specifically vested in the President. Any requests sent to the EPA’s electronic mailbox were forwarded to the White House, and any further questions about process and decisions should be directed to the White House” (emphasis original) (page 1973).
 - EPA political appointee Aaron Szabo stated that, if a facility did not receive an exemption, “we would recommend reaching out to the White House about why any facility was or was not included on the list as this decision was made by the White House as it is a presidential authority.” (page 1894).
- In fact, the records show that EPA has worked in close collaboration with the White House to coordinate the pollution exemption program.
- Mr. Szabo proposed the use of the presidential exemptions provision to Emily Underwood, a White House staffer then serving as Special Assistant to the President, in early March 2025 (pages 2202-2203).
 - [Previously released records](#) show that Assistant Administrator Aaron Szabo appears to have led the design of the exemption request process at EPA.
 - Ms. Underwood reportedly directed the [New York Times](#) to Mr. Szabo when asked about the exemptions, saying “The best person to talk to on that would be Aaron Szabo at the EPA.”
- The newly released records show that Mr. Szabo, as well as Ms. Tardif, continued to lead EPA’s coordination on the presidential exemptions and played an active role in organizing, verifying, and summarizing the exemption applications for the White House and in interfacing with exemption applicants. At one point, heavily redacted records show Mr. Szabo directed EPA career officials to fulfill specific requests from the White House to support the presidential exemption process. Career officials responded with an attached document labeled “exemptions document to check.docx” (see pages 2081-2083).
 - Note: EPA has not yet provided this document to EDF even though EDF’s FOIA request sought all documents attached to responsive emails.

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Trump EPA officials have emphasized that the National Energy Dominance Council is taking the lead on Clean Air Act exemptions for the White House.

- EPA political appointees indicated that the National Energy Dominance Council (“NEDC”) led the presidential exemption process within the White House.
 - EPA political appointee Abigale Tardif specifically directed industry to contact John Reiten, NEDC Deputy Executive Director, as the “best contact” (page 2102, see also page 2110, 1933).
 - David Copley, who works in the Trump White House ([now](#) for the National Security Council, previously for the NEDC), reached out to an EPA political appointee in August 2025 seeking input to “get smart” regarding an industry request for a presidential exemption (page 2098).
- The NEDC is the advisory council President Trump [established by executive order](#) in February 2025 to “advise the President how best to exercise his authority to produce more energy to make America energy dominant.” The NEDC has [touted](#) the “concierge, white glove service” it provides to the fossil fuel industry.

In addition to the presidential exemptions under Clean Air Act Section 112(i)(4), the Trump EPA has also pursued non-enforcement guarantees for industry and has considered other ways to help industry avoid compliance with pollution reduction requirements.

- The new records show that Assistant Administrator Aaron Szabo on April 3, 2026, transmitted a memorandum to Jeffrey Hall, the Assistant Administrator for EPA’s Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance (“OECA”), requesting a nationwide non-enforcement guarantee for certain limits on ethylene oxide emissions from sterilization facilities while EPA pursued its regulatory rollback (page 2067). The memorandum asks OECA to issue a statement clarifying that EPA is “not intending to take enforcement action for noncompliance” with certain Clean Air Act regulations for commercial sterilizer facilities, before adding that “[a]ny statement should be clear that the EPA will continue to enforce provisions that would be unaffected by [EPA’s proposed rule to weaken the regulations].” The memo specifically requests OECA not enforce the [2024 limits on emissions of ethylene oxide](#), a potent carcinogen, which EPA previously determined were necessary to “protect public health with an ample margin of safety.” Mr. Szabo’s memo specifically says that “OAR is seeking a bridge that provides enforcement discretion and greater certainty to industry until the Agency can finalize” its proposed roll back of the 2024 limits.
 - Before joining the Trump EPA, Mr. Szabo worked as a lobbyist for a trade group that opposed tighter restrictions on emissions from commercial sterilization facilities.

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- The memo shows the Trump EPA has considered pathways to effectively nullify existing pollution protections without going through the regular process of changing its regulations.
- The White House has already [granted dozens of sterilization facilities' exemptions](#) from Clean Air Act regulations on July 17, 2025, and issued a [proposed rule](#) to weaken those regulations on March 17, 2026.
- Records show that industry entities have asked for other types of deadline extensions and exemptions, such as under Clean Air Act Section 112(i)(3)(B).
 - Huntsman Corporation sent a letter to EPA Assistant Administrator Szabo and Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator Tardif on October 31, 2025, thanking them for meeting and stating, regarding the hazardous air pollution standards for Polyether Polyols and Chemical Manufacturing Area Sources: “[W]e believe we presented you and this Administration with a path forward to secure additional time under the consent decrees to ensure that the many competing interests can be adequately addressed. Thus, we are now going — as you suggested — to the Office of the General Counsel to discuss that pathway and options to extend the pending deadlines.” (page 915).
 - Solvatum Corporation (a commercial sterilization facility) and Bracewell LLP (a law and government relations firm) have requested, in January and February 2026, that EPA grant a one-year compliance extension for certain Clean Air Act regulations under Clean Air Act Section 112(i)(3)(B), which allows a 1-year compliance extension if additional time is needed to install controls (pages 2054 and 2122).

Trump EPA officials have met with industry representatives to discuss the presidential exemption process and the NESHAP rollbacks repeatedly.

- The records released to EPA show at least 14 meetings between EPA political officials and industry representatives to discuss various NESHAP rules, presidential exemptions, and compliance extensions (see Table 1).
- Note: These records may not encompass all relevant meetings. EDF has additional FOIA requests pending with EPA seeking the full meeting records of EPA political appointees Mr. Szabo and Ms. Tardif, amongst others.

EDF will continue to diligently pursue and make available to the public records produced through FOIA to shine a light on the Trump administration’s unlawful granting of scores of exemptions to allow industrial facilities to skirt essential clean air rules. The American people all have a right to understand how their government is making decisions about these vital health protections.

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Table 1: Meetings between EPA and industry representatives to discuss the presidential exemptions or NESHAPs

Date	Industry attendees	Govt. attendees	Description	Page number (Bates number)
Feb. 2025	Dow Chemical and Union Carbide	Abigale Tardif	Dow thanked Tardif for meeting to discuss concerns with the HON Rule and asked for an immediate compliance extension. This was before the exemption process opened. Dow and Union later received exemptions from the HON Rule.	Page 1326 (ED_021114_0000 1269-00001)
Mar. 6, 2025	"Industry," not identified	EPA Office of Air and Radiation (OAR)	An internal sterilizer briefing was timed to come before "the OAR meeting with industry on 3/6/2025 titled 'Clean Air Action Section 112'"	Page 2187 (ED_018865_0000 0075-00001)
Mar. 19–25, 2025	Freeport-Mc MoRan, through Vinson & Elkins	Abigale Tardif	Traylor asked for a "brief call" about how Freeport could "obtain a Presidential exemption". Tardif replied by email with the web link and wrote "I believe that is the right approach." EPA's press office later said Tardif "never had a call" with Traylor (page 1930). Freeport-McMoRan later received an exemption from their Copper Smelter.	Pages 1842-1843 (2026-EPA-04147: ED_018865_0000 0705-00003, ED_021114A_000 07586-00009)
Mar. 25, 2025, around noon ET	STERIS, a provider of commercial sterilization services	EPA Career Staff	STERIS asked for time to "answer a few questions" after EPA's notice of the Presidential Exemptions. EPA Career Staff responded "I will give you a call. I may have one or two from my team on the call."	Pages 2188-2190 (ED_D18865_000 00231-00001)
Week of about Mar. 24, 2025, plus a follow-up	Talen Energy	Abigale Tardif	Talen wrote that it "was a pleasure meeting you last week," confirmed its Colstrip exemption request had been filed, and asked for more time. Tardif said her scheduling team would "find time for us to chat." Talen Energy later received an exemption from the MATS Rule.	Pages 2204-2205 (ED_018807_0000 0105-00001)
Mar. 28–31, 2025	NorthWestern Energy (CEO Brian Bird)	Aaron Szabo	Bird asked for "15 minutes with Administrator Zeldin to chat about MATs and the new rules impact on	Pages 2193-2195

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			the Colstrip plant in Montana." Szabo said he would check with the scheduler and offered to talk himself. Bird replied, "Look forward to a discussion this week." NorthWestern Energy (and co-owner Talen Energy) later received an exemption from the MATS Rule for the Colstrip facility.	(ED_018807_0000 0101-00001 to - 00003)
Spring 2025	Van Ness Feldman (law firm), for unnamed clients	Abigale Tardif	A lawyer for Van Ness Feldman recalled that "we met several times in the spring" on regulatory matters affecting utility matters. In September she offered a call for a new MATS exemption client, and Tardif referred her to the White House.	Pages 2103-2104 (ED_021114O_00 003594-00002- 00003)
Apr. 15, 2025	Buckeye Power	Abigale Tardif	Buckeye resubmitted its exemption request "Per conversation with Abbie" with the corrected file. Buckeye Power later received an exemption from the MATS Rule.	Pages 1814 (ED_021114B_00 010032-00001)
May 20–28, 2025	North-Western Energy	Aaron Szabo, through the OAR Invitations mailbox	After the exemption was granted, Szabo agreed to talk about MATS reconsideration. The company noted that "the presidential exemption is appreciated"	Pages 1154-55 (ED_021114D_00 002863-00001 to - 00002)
Jun. 16, 2025	Mindset (a public policy firm), for unnamed clients	Abigale Tardif	Tardif said she was "happy to connect" but that exemption decisions "are being made at the White House."	Pages 2105-06 (ED_021114D_00 003639-00001 to - 00002)
Sept.– Oct. 2025	National Lime Association	Abigale Tardif and Aaron Szabo, with EPA staff	Tardif wrote on Sept. 17, 2025: "We have been talking to the Lime Association and will be meeting with them again soon". They scheduled another meeting in October to discuss the compliance deadline and reconsideration of the lime NESHAP.	Pages 1150 and 2092 (ED_021114D_00 003101-00002; ED_021114D_000 02654-00001)
About Oct.	Huntsman Corporation	Abigale Tardif and	Huntsman thanked them "for making time last week" to talk	Page 915

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20–24, 2025		Aaron Szabo	about HON reconsideration and the PEPO and CMAS rules. Huntsman Corporation later received exemptions from the HON Rule.	(ED_021114C_0000016-0000)
Feb. 2026	Bracewell (law firm) for unnamed clients to discuss the HON Rule	Abigale Tardif	The request was for an in-person HQ meeting on “the presidential exemption process”. Tardif said “we play no role in this” but offered to meet on the HON Rule only. Later, Bracewell thanked Tardif for meeting “several days ago” and followed up on “the discussion we had about exemptions,” meaning EPA’s one-year Section 112(i)(3)(B) extensions.	Pages 2053, 2122 (ED_021114D_00002687-00001, ED_021114D_00003747-00001)

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