

## EPA

## Ex-coal exec pushes to reappoint Trump-era chair to air board

Sean Reilly, E&E News reporter • Published: Thursday, May 20, 2021



Steve Milloy is a lawyer and former coal company executive who wrote the book "Scare Pollution." [The Heartland Institute/YouTube](#)

As author of the book "Scare Pollution," Steve Milloy scorns the scientific consensus that long-term exposure to soot can be deadly in some circumstances or add to the risk of serious problems like stroke and asthma.

Now Milloy, a lawyer and former coal company executive, wants EPA to reappoint the former chair of an advisory panel who discounted research finding that the agency's soot standards need strengthening to better protect public health, according to a roster obtained by E&E News.

The [roster](#), released by EPA this week in response to a Freedom of Information Act request, shows who nominated each of the [100 active candidates](#) vying to join the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee. The closely watched seven-member panel, usually known by its acronym CASAC, is charged with providing independent expertise to the agency during periodic reviews of the air quality standards for soot, ground-level ozone and four other pollutants.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan ousted the previous incumbents in March on the grounds that a "reset" was needed in response to membership policies under former President Trump that fueled allegations of politicization ([Greenwire](#), March 31). But with high-profile decisions looming, restoring the committee's reputation for independence may not be a simple task for EPA officials, the roster suggests.

"I expect they are thinking about those dimensions," said Gretchen Goldman, a senior research official with the Union of Concerned Scientists. With a doctorate in environmental engineering, Goldman was a prominent critic of the Trump administration's policies and is now among the CASAC applicants. "There will certainly be more scrutiny on who they choose for this panel than there has been in the past," she said.

Also on the list, for example, are scientists nominated by the American Thoracic Society, a medical association that focuses on pulmonary diseases and is on record as backing tighter limits for both soot and ozone. In an interview, Gary Ewart, the group's chief of advocacy and government relations, confirmed that its nominees are Thoracic Society members but said that there was no litmus test and that they were selected for their expertise in various disciplines.

If they're appointed, Ewart said, "we expect them to act with the same scientific rigor and clarity of thought that made them excellent candidates to begin with."

CASAC members normally serve staggered, three-year terms, so it's unusual, if not unprecedented, for an EPA chief to have the power to remake the entire panel at one time.

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Already, congressional Republicans have suggested the Biden administration sought to purge members who didn't share its beliefs ([E&E News PM](#), April 7).

Gretchen Goldman

More broadly, the Union of Concerned Scientists and other organizations are pressing federal agencies to take specific steps to diversify the ranks of their advisory committees, which have typically been dominated by white men. In a [response](#) released by the group this week, a senior EPA manager said the agency will take the recommendations into consideration and called diversity a top priority for Regan.

More than one-third of the CASAC applicant pool is female, according to the roster, which does not indicate candidates' racial or ethnic backgrounds. EPA is collecting public feedback on the 100 nominees who agreed to be considered; Regan is expected to name a new committee by the end of the fiscal year in September ([Greenwire](#), May 11).

### CASAC alums



Former Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee Chairman Tony Cox. [Sean Reilly/E&E News](#)

Many of the active applicants are university-based academic researchers who would be new to the committee, and others are alumni from past administrations.

Milloy, a member of Trump's EPA transition team after the 2016 presidential election, also dismisses mainstream climate research showing that human activities are warming the planet. Among his half-dozen CASAC nominees who expressed interest in serving is Tony Cox, a consultant and risk assessment expert who was the committee's chair from late 2017 until his dismissal with the rest of the panel two months ago.

During his tenure, Cox oversaw a tumultuous review of the soot standards that ended last year with then-EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler's decision to stick with the status quo despite the conclusion of his career staff that the annual exposure limit needed tightening to prevent thousands of premature deaths each year. In making that decision, Wheeler leaned heavily on CASAC's findings that the research underlying that conclusion was too clouded with uncertainties to warrant a change.

"I nominated these people because I think they have more honest views about PM2.5 and science in general," Milloy said in an interview, using a technical term for soot. On his [blog](#), Milloy last month urged readers to endorse his slate of candidates.

As a result, some of his choices have the backing of people with no evident scientific background, including one who identified himself only as "Mr. American Patriot," the roster shows. Asked whether he expected EPA to take his picks seriously, Milloy replied that the agency should focus on the candidates, "not who the nominator is."

Cox is among four Trump-era CASAC members fired by Regan now seeking to return to the committee. In an email exchange, he said he does not share Milloy's position that there is no credible evidence of health harms from soot inhalation, adding that "it is quite plausible that sufficiently high and prolonged exposures to some forms ... can increase risks of inflammation-mediated diseases in humans."

But Cox also cited data showing that a steep reduction in soot concentrations in Ireland did not lead to a detectable drop in death rates and said more work is needed "to quantify causal impacts of changes in exposure on changes in risk."

Of the other three former members, the list shows that James Boylan, an engineer in Georgia's natural resources and environmental protection agency, nominated himself; Sabine Lange, a manager in the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's toxicology and risk assessment division, was nominated by the agency's chair; and Dr. Mark Frampton, a retired University of Rochester pulmonologist, put his name forward with the backing of the Thoracic Society and the Boston-based Health Effects Institute.

As part of the same self-styled reset, Regan also fired the 42 members of the Science Advisory Board, which provides outside know-how to EPA on a range of scientific and technical matters. More than 350 people have been nominated to join that panel or various auxiliary committees, according to a list released late yesterday by EPA ([see related story](#)). While Regan encouraged former members to reapply, they have no assurance of winning a new term.

Looming over the CASAC appointments is the likelihood that EPA will revisit Wheeler's decision to leave the existing soot standards in place. President Biden has already instructed the agency to consider that option. In a [court filing](#) earlier this week in federal litigation challenging that decision, EPA attorneys indicated that a decision is forthcoming within three months.

More technically known as fine particulate matter — or PM2.5 because individual specks are no bigger than 2.5 microns in diameter, one-thirtieth the width of a human hair — soot is seen as a particularly dangerous pollutant because of its ability to seep deep into the lungs and even find its way into the bloodstream. Health studies have shown a "significant association" between particle exposure and health risks, including premature deaths, according to an online EPA [summary](#).

Because soot is spawned, both directly and indirectly, by a wealth of pollution sources, EPA's accompanying ambient air quality standards are closely watched by industry.

Cox, who had done work for the American Petroleum Institute and other trade groups before his appointment to CASAC, has previously said his goal as chair was to ensure that the review was handled impartially.

"I think that the EPA's assessments ... routinely conflate associations with effects," Cox said in response to emailed questions that cited the agency summary. "I think sound science and responsible advice to policymakers require much greater precision in thought and language."

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