

# GOVERNMENT MATTERS

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## **Stories of Americans Cut Off of Emergency Unemployment Compensation**

**by Jessica Schieder**

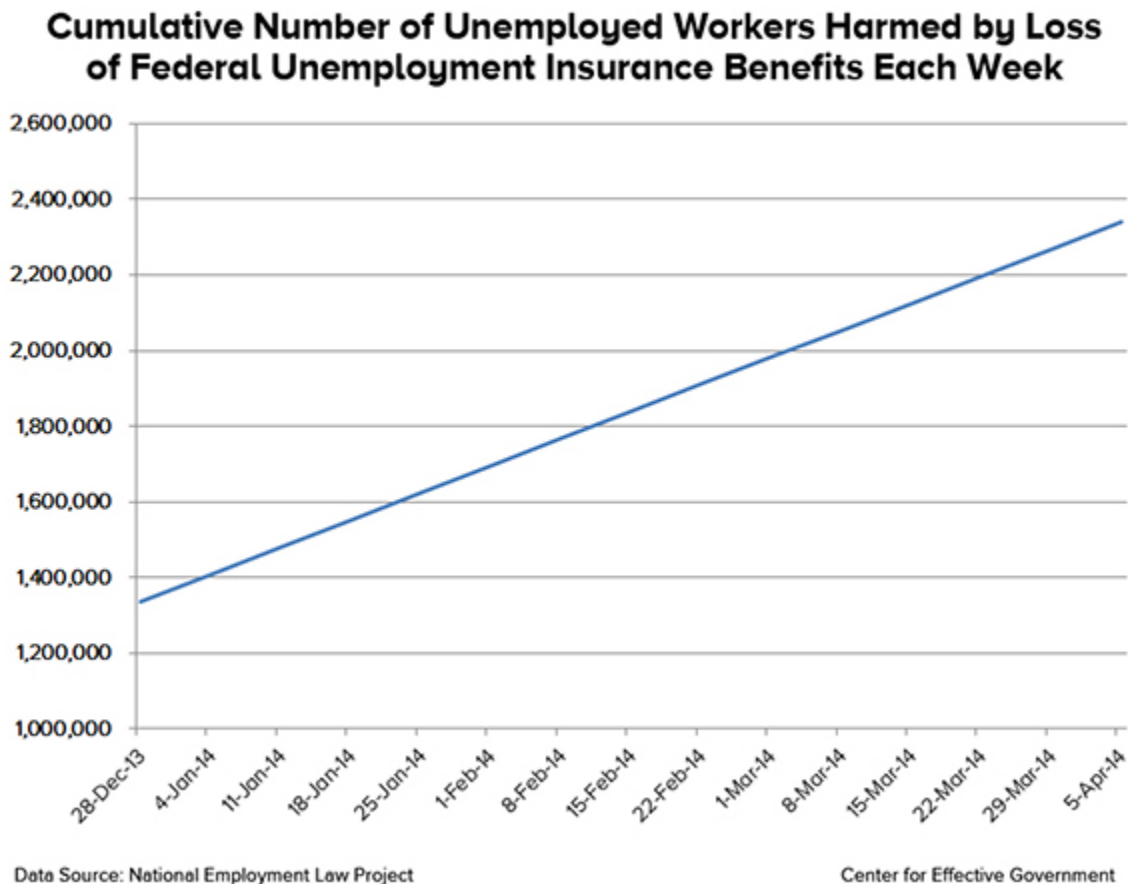
It was a long and cold winter in Washington, DC, in more ways than one.

At the end of 2013, Congress allowed Emergency Unemployment Compensation (EUC) to expire, leaving 1.3 million Americans who had been without work for more than six months suddenly cut off from their lifeline benefits. Unemployment benefits don't provide a lot – [about \\$269](#) a week on average – but it is enough to put some food on the table, pay the most urgent bills, and hang on by your fingernails until work can be found. Without this support, many families are forced to drain their retirement accounts and sell their belongings. Some face homelessness.

Rather than dealing with the suffering caused by the expiration of EUC, some members of Congress have used hard-working Americans as a political football, demanding that EUC benefits be paid for with cuts to other programs. The Senate came to a funding compromise earlier this month, and now the action moves to the House.

Meanwhile the number of unemployed workers losing benefits marches steadily higher – growing by [72,000 each week](#). Since emergency benefits were cut off last December, an estimated [\\$5.4 billion in](#)

[economic activity has been lost](#), as the unemployed no longer spend those benefits in grocery stores, gas stations, and small businesses on Main Street. And congressional inaction could put the jobs of those still working at risk, too – if unemployment insurance is not extended, another [240,000 jobs](#) could be lost this year.



[click to enlarge](#)

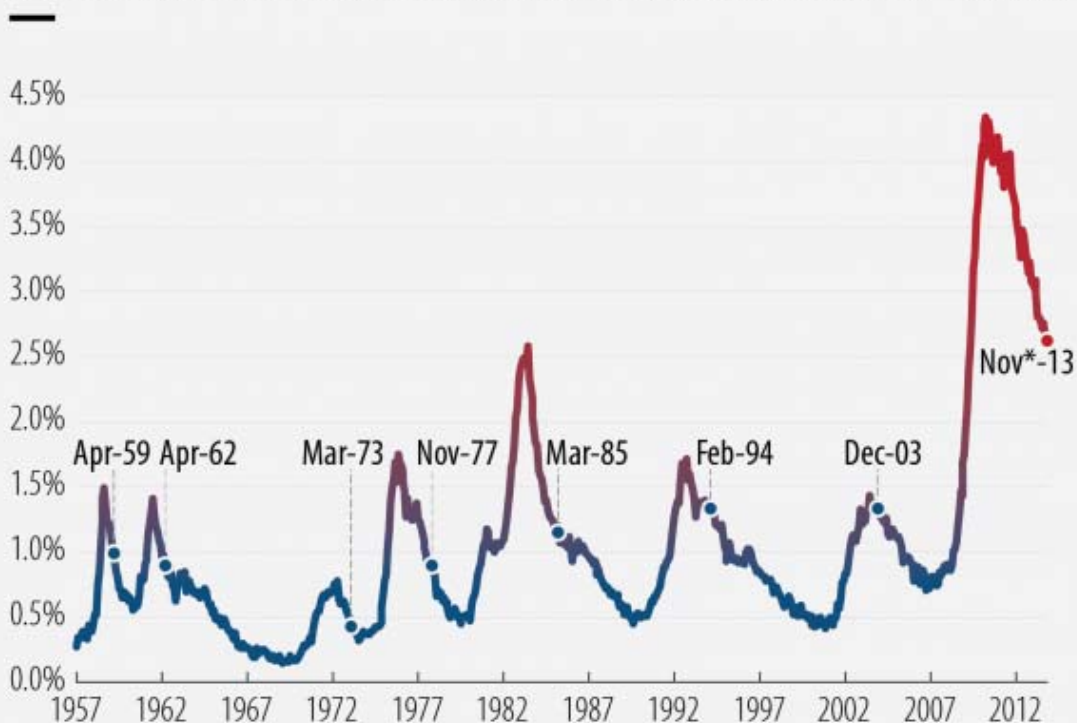
In a blog post titled "[Emergency Unemployment Benefits Are Not Forgotten](#)," the Center for Effective Government sought to remind our readers that real people are watching the posturing in Congress while waiting anxiously for assistance. We wrote about the tough job market and the difficulties average workers were having, even as the media lost interest and some congressional staff told us the issue was inconvenient.

The reaction to this short post was surprisingly powerful. The post was read by more than 100,000 people and inspired thousands of comments, many of them chronicling the suffering faced by families whose benefits were suddenly withdrawn.

These individuals were desperate, worried, and frustrated. For many of them, this was their first encounter with a federal assistance program, and, as individuals used to paying taxes and contributing to society, they were understandably baffled to be left out in the cold by elected representatives in their time of need.

## Long-term unemployment is higher today than at any other point when Congress allowed extended benefits to expire

Long-term unemployment rate with labels marking when extended unemployment insurance benefits were allowed to expire following prior recessions, Jan 1957–Nov 2013



\*Extensions expired in December 2013 but latest labor force data available are for November 2013.

**Note:** Months in which special extended benefits program expired are labeled above.

**Source:** Author's analysis of Current Population Survey public data series and the Council of Economic Advisers (2013) <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/uireport-2013-12-4.pdf>

**ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE**

One of the first commenters on the blog post, who self-identified as "Betsy," shared her story:

My husband was laid off in June 2013. He is an Oil Heating Technician in Massachusetts. [...] As the months have rolled by he has still not secured a position. The job market is horrible. His Massachusetts unemployment ran out like 1.3 million other Americans in January. [...] He has paid taxes. He isn't a law breaker. He is not a criminal. [H]owever our country is making us feel like losers. [...] I think it is disgusting for the Republican [P]arty to hold our survival in the palms of their hands.

As the number of people left without assistance rose to just under two million – including teachers, military veterans, single parents, newly graduated young professionals, grandparents, and just about every imaginable demographic – and our blog followers grew, we started responding to the conversation they were having on our website.

To help our readers make their voices heard, we gathered contact information for congressional representatives, provided links to petitions to extend benefits, and shared the latest news and research on unemployment. In two follow-up blog posts (see [here](#) and [here](#)), we shared insight into the unemployment insurance extension debates on the Hill. Additionally, we encouraged readers to [share their stories](#) on our site so we could share them with policymakers and the media. Almost 1,000 of you have so far, and we've ensured that your stories made it to congressional staff.

Members of this online community encouraged one another to act. They made calls to congressional offices and shared what they had heard with one another. Some wrote letters to local newspapers, and others helped circulate petitions as a way of mobilizing greater awareness and political support. Readers shared the latest articles on unemployment found online and recommended resources for finding help.

The conversations were heart-wrenching. Commenters came from across the country, every socioeconomic background, and every profession. Many described themselves as apolitical, or self-identified as Republicans, who in the past had been very skeptical of federal assistance programs. Our staff was moved to tears by the earnestness, honesty, and pain in the stories that were piling up online.

A couple of weeks into the conversation, one of our regular commenters called the office and asked us to keep the blog comments section open because the visitors "had become a family and social support network." She emerged as a leader. Energetic, articulate, and inspiring, she provided encouragement and sympathy, directed others to resources, and reminded everyone to call their representatives and to check in with their local employment office officials. She fostered and embodied the online community that developed among our commenters.

As someone who has spent time answering phones in a Senate office, I knew that constituents calling into congressional offices *do* make a difference, even if the voices on the other side of the line sound cold and exhausted.

In a fourth blog post, we asked our readers to [submit their stories](#), along with contact information, using a web form. We quickly collected hundreds of detailed stories of the hardship already caused by the failure to extend assistance.

Sorting the stories by state, we personally lugged hundreds of pages of stories and dropped them onto desks in the offices of 23 senators over two days.

In the middle of the second afternoon of delivering packets, the Senate bill to extend unemployment compensation passed a key procedural vote. With [10 Republicans](#) crossing the aisle to ensure the unemployment extension received a vote, 65 senators voted to move the bill forward.

Shortly after, a staffer from Sen. Harry Reid's (D-NV) office called the Center for Effective Government thanking us for compiling the stories and inquiring about how he could reach out to a specific Nevadan. Her story was shared on the floor of the Senate on the day of the final Senate vote.

Here's that story:

I have worked since I was 14 years old, and I am currently 29 years old and a single mother who lost my job through no fault of my own. I was with the same company since I was 20 years old, and worked my up with hard work and dedication. I left that company managing 17 employees, who were directly under me. Since my benefits have expired I had to walk away from my apartment and all of my son['s] and my belongings. We have nothing. I worked so hard for so many years. We now live with my elderly grandmother in her small condo. My son and I sleep on an air mattress in the front room. I look for work every day, even though I have no money to get around. I have to borrow \$20 here and there just to [get] my son to school. There have been times when I didn't even know how my son and I would eat at night. I signed him up for after school just to ensure he gets three meals a day. I am a hard-working American who wants to work and earn money, but I haven't been able to find work. Without these benefits my son and I have lost everything, and I'm afraid there's worse to come if EUC Benefits are not extend[ed] soon.

Sen. Reid's floor speech begins at minute 2:30 [in a video available online](#). (The reference to this Nevadan's story can be found at minute 5:23 of [the clip](#).)

On the evening of April 7, the Senate passed the unemployment bill. To follow up, we blogged again, asking for more stories for the House debate to come. In total, we have close to 1,000 stories from readers, which we are now sharing with House offices.

We have dropped off dauntingly large packets to House offices, including both Republicans and Democrats, and we will continue to deliver more. In response to our efforts, we have been contacted by the office of House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), as well as the office of Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA).

When we left hundred-page packets of stories in each office, the response of the desk attendant in each office was almost always the same, as their eyes skimmed a few lines: "Are these all from *different people*?"

The highly personal stories touched people. Instead of hiding behind abstract budget arguments and numbers, these stories force people to see that the lives of real, fresh-and-blood humans are being harmed. This would not be possible without the courageous sharing of your stories. They create a counterpoint to the voices of professional lobbyists, business leaders, and party politicians, who all too often dominate the debate.

Packets of stories, sorted by state, have been delivered to 35 House offices and counting. The raw emotion they contain is mesmerizing. We have established a landing page, "[Emergency Unemployment Benefits: Stories from Hard-Working Americans](#)," featuring a few of these stories each day.

Here's a recent selection:

- **Milledgeville, Ohio:** "I've had to move in with a friend, I've worked for 30 years, raised three college educated children. Never been on public assistance or unemployment, I'm 50 years old, I made \$45,000 last year; I can't find a job making more than 9.50 an hour. I can't rent a place to live on that!!!! So I turned to the government in a different way and applied for a FOOD CARD, \$186 a month and now receive Medicaid. It's a bad day when a bill for the rich is pushed through at a cost of \$50 billion and myself and millions like me are hanging their heads in shame!!"
- **Panama City Beach, Florida:** "I am a single father of two small children, a boy who is 5 and a little girl who is 3. I worked for a steel pipe company for over 6 years and loved my job. A couple years ago the company I worked for did a "downsizing" and I was laid off along with 20 other people[...]Unemployment isn't something that people are asking for just because they are lazy or do not want to work, it's something that some people need temporarily to be able to survive on. I am 33 years old and have worked since I was 15 years old paying my taxes and never asking for a handout, but now I truly need one and I hope the [S]enate and the [H]ouse realize that this extension needs to be passed for the people like myself that are trying to learn a career and get back in the workforce. It's not a handout for lazy people, it's a safety net for good hard working Americans that have fallen on hard times. It's the right thing to do to pass this extension. Put yourself in some of our shoes for a minute and maybe you'll realize it's the morally right thing to do."
- **Baltimore, Maryland:** "I have just been on the phone for days, trying to save my house because even though I am educated @ 52, I cannot get a job to help myself, or my family who rely on me. My son who worked with me has been able to find part time jobs here and there, but not enough to pay the mortgage or even close. Once they cut my benefits, my hopes of keeping my house were gone. I cannot find assistance anywhere to save my property, except counsel on how to gracefully give it up. So very soon, 4 people ranging in age from 52 to 5 will have no place to live, and my grandson is autistic. [...] [T]he elected officials could have remedied this situation."

## **Weaker Campaign Finance Limits Increase Need for Effective Disclosure**

**by Gavin Baker**

On April 2, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *McCutcheon vs. Federal Election Commission*, striking down aggregate limits on the contributions that individuals can give to political candidates. Coupled with the court's earlier rulings that loosened restrictions on corporate spending on election ads, this decision makes comprehensive and timely disclosure of campaign spending even more important. Voters should be able to see who is financing campaigns.



## The Ruling

In a 5-4 decision, the Court's majority ruled that the previous overall campaign contribution limit of \$123,200 violated an individual's First Amendment right to freedom of expression. The limits for contributions to individual candidates and parties (\$2,600 per candidate per election; \$32,400 per party committee per year) will remain in place. However, without an aggregate limit, an individual can now give the maximum to candidates in every House and Senate race in the country, which has been [estimated](#) to total more than \$2.4 million. In addition, more than \$1.6 million more could be donated to political parties at the national and state levels. The Center for Responsive Politics [estimated that 591 people](#) provided the maximum amount of direct campaign funds to individual candidates in 2012. This ruling will allow this group to contribute even more.

Since the earliest days of the republic, observers have held that large campaign contributions by the wealthy will result in disproportionate influence over politicians and the decisions they make. These concerns are the reason campaign contribution limits were established. The *McCutcheon* decision will allow the super-wealthy to donate larger amounts of money directly to candidates around the entire country and further distort the idea that each citizen has an equal voice in the democratic process.

The decision is particularly troubling, coming on heels of the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which eliminated a ban on corporations running political candidate ads and opened the floodgates for wealthy individuals and corporations to establish super political action committees (PACs). While some forms of commercial speech have long enjoyed some level of First Amendment protection, *Citizens United* took a legal fiction indirectly established by the Court in the late 1800s ([corporate "personhood"](#)) and extended it far beyond its original extent, essentially granting corporations the same free speech rights as those the Framers intended for individual Americans.

These concerns were evident in the reactions of public interest groups working on campaign finance issues. Miles Rappaport, the new president of Common Cause, [claimed](#) the decision was "further opening the floodgates for the nation's wealthiest few to drown out the voices of the rest of us." Marge Baker, executive vice president at People for the American Way, [opined](#) that the "Supreme Court has given its stamp of approval to a government unduly influenced by the rich and powerful."

## Disclosure

With the Supreme Court striking down key campaign contribution restrictions and limits, public disclosure will become even more important to our democracy. Effective disclosure would allow citizens to track influence that can arise from campaign contributions. Even if attempts at influence-peddling cannot be prevented, transparency can hold these efforts up to public scrutiny.

Currently, direct campaign contributions to candidates or political parties must be reported to the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and publicly disclosed. The increased contributions under the *McCutcheon* decision will still have to be tracked and disclosed. However, the current system is limited in its utility because it takes time to collect and process donation data, particularly the flood of contributions that come in the final months before an election. Unfortunately, some of the largest, last-minute donations do not become public until *after* an election.

Moreover, contributions to PACs do not have the same disclosure requirements, so PACs offer individuals an alternative means to contribute to elections but remain anonymous. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision increased the flow of untracked money through PACs by allowing corporations to make unlimited contributions to them. The court noted in *Citizens United* that disclosure could be a useful check on such contributions, but Congress has been unable to move forward with legislation to require greater disclosure of donor information for PACs.

Some observers have [theorized](#) that the *McCutcheon* decision could result in more transparency about direct campaign contributions by individual donors. By enabling larger direct contributions to campaigns, the thinking goes, mega-donors may give directly to candidates – donations which would be disclosed to the FEC – rather than funneling money through secretive PACs. But nothing prevents rich donors from doing both: making larger direct contributions to candidates while increasing their PAC contributions.

### **Limiting the Notion of Corruption**

*McCutcheon* also upheld another controversial line of reasoning from the *Citizens United* case: its definition of corruption. [As Nathaniel Persily wrote](#) in *The New York Times*, the Supreme Court "asserted that corruption is a narrow concept extending only to the rare phenomenon when a politician does an official favor in exchange for the contribution (so-called 'quid pro quo' corruption). The influence and access rich individuals and corporations enjoy because of their expenditures was not enough to justify campaign finance restrictions. Rather, you now needed to show that money was buying votes or other political favors." In other words, a direct exchange of money for a vote or decision has to be established (a smoking gun) for corruption to be found. Few elected officials are careless or foolish enough to engage in this kind of obvious quid pro quo today.

This limited view does not take into account structural corruption. Yet "in an era with inequality not seen since the Gilded Age and growing ... [w]hen more and more sectors are highly concentrated with a few big players, often acting in concert, who write or heavily influence any regulation that pertains to them," [wrote the \*Seattle Times\*' Jon Talton](#), systemic corruption is the more serious problem. In light of [recent research findings](#) that economic elites significantly influence public policy and [that their interests diverge significantly from those of everyday citizens](#), the *McCutcheon* decision seems likely to tilt the balance even further away from a government responsive to the needs of its citizens.

Furthermore, by narrowing the definition of corruption, the *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon* decisions restrict the rationale for regulating money in politics, which will make it harder to institute future campaign finance reforms. Talton concludes, "Now the only answer is a constitutional amendment."

### **Moving Toward Even More Extreme Views**

The *McCutcheon* ruling – abolishing overall donation limits while leaving the cap on individual contribution amounts in place – has not settled the issue. In fact, it may have emboldened those who would further undermine the remaining restrictions that prevent wealthy interests from buying our elections. After the *McCutcheon* decision, Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus announced his view that [all contribution limits should be struck down](#). Priebus is reportedly



"conflicted" about whether the public should even be able to know the identity of campaign contributors, according to *The Washington Post*.

But even the most conservative justices have upheld the need for transparency. Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in his 2010 concurrence in [Doe v. Reed](#), "Requiring people to stand up in public for their political acts fosters civic courage, without which democracy is doomed." But disclosure alone won't save democracy.

The problem is clear: we have a political system attuned to the needs of wealthy donors and large corporations. This is not what most Americans would call government of, by, and for the people. Unfortunately, the *McCutcheon* decision chips away at the options available for solving that problem.

One way forward would be a [constitutional amendment](#) to overturn the decisions in *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon*. Another approach would be to counteract the concentrated power of mega-donors by amplifying the impact of small donations, [as New York City](#) has successfully done – perhaps an interim step toward a constitutional solution. Without action, the future prospects for an effective democracy will dim.

## **Expected Budget Cuts Prompt EPA to Reduce Performance Targets in Five-Year Strategic Plan**

**by Katie Weatherford**

Just over one year ago, a fertilizer facility in West, TX exploded, killing 15 people and injuring hundreds more. In January, approximately 10,000 gallons of toxic chemicals leaked from a storage tank at a Freedom Industries facility in Charleston, WV into the Elk River, contaminating the drinking water supply of over 300,000 nearby residents. And in February, thousands of gallons of coal ash spilled from unlined ponds at Duke Energy's coal plant into the Dan River in North Carolina. More environmental incidents like these are happening regularly, risking the public's health and the environment. We need stronger national standards for toxic chemicals and hazardous waste, and these standards need to be enforced. But the federal agency charged with issuing and enforcing national environmental standards, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has been subjected to significant [budget cuts](#) over the past several years that have restricted its ability to carry out its mission.

The impact of these cuts on the agency's future operations are reflected in EPA's [Strategic Plan for FY 2014-2018](#), released on April 10, which sets weak performance measures for tracking the agency's progress toward its primary objectives over the next five years. The Center for Effective Government had previously submitted [comments](#) to EPA on the draft version of the Strategic Plan, calling on the agency to adopt more ambitious performance targets.

## **EPA's 2014-2018 Strategic Plan**

EPA's Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2014 to 2018 focuses on achieving five cross-cutting goals:

- Addressing Climate Change and Improving Air Quality;
- Protecting America's Waters;
- Cleaning up Communities and Advancing Sustainable Development;
- Ensuring the Safety of Chemicals and Preventing Pollution; and
- Protecting Human Health and the Environment by Enforcing Laws and Assuring Compliance

### *Goal 1: Addressing Climate Change and Improving Air Quality*

EPA's Strategic Plan emphasizes the need to address climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from mobile and stationary sources and discusses efforts to develop and implement climate adaptation plans. For 2014-2015, EPA will work in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Transportation to pass the second phase of fuel economy standards. Additionally, over the next five years, EPA plans to improve air quality, restore and protect the upper-atmosphere ozone layer, and reduce radiation exposure.

Other goals EPA should prioritize include the completion of [greenhouse gas emissions limits for existing power plants](#) by 2015, in accordance with the president's Climate Action Plan, and finalizing a review of the national ambient air quality standard (NAAQS) for ozone by 2015. The scientific evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current standard should be strengthened to protect public health and the environment. Completing this long-delayed review within the next two years will allow EPA to move forward with implementing a more protective ozone air quality standard.

### *Goal 2: Protecting America's Waters*

EPA commits itself to meeting and maintaining water quality and drinking water standards that will ensure public health, fish, shellfish, and recreational waters are protected. The plan also pledges to maintain the quality of our nation's water bodies, water resources, and ecosystems, but fails to lay out other priorities or to set measures for each objective.

Of particular concern is EPA's plan to protect drinking water resources by "address[ing] chemicals and contaminants by group, as opposed to working on a chemical-by-chemical basis." EPA has not indicated how it will implement this new approach or how many chemical contaminant groups it intends to address, so how it will track its progress is unclear.

### *Goal 3: Cleaning up Communities and Advancing Sustainable Development*

Despite the important objectives outlined in the plan, the substantial reduction in performance targets compared to previous years is concerning. EPA plans to cut inspections of risk management plan (RMP) facilities over the next five years from an average of 570 inspections a year to only 460 inspections per year – a reduction of almost 10 percent. One year after the explosion of a fertilizer facility in West, TX, EPA should be working to conduct more, not fewer, inspections.

#### *Goal 4: Ensuring the Safety of Chemicals and Preventing Pollution*

EPA plans to reduce human exposure to harmful chemicals by promoting safer alternatives. It also plans to promote the conservation and protection of natural resources by assessing the human health and environmental risks of over 250 pesticides and other chemicals in commerce in 2014-15.

However, the plan would be much stronger if the agency had included a baseline for assessing progress. For instance, if EPA considers the creation of human health benchmark values for 363 pesticides in drinking water as "assessments" for purposes of this goal, then the target has already been achieved. Similarly, although the agency says it will assess whether a chemical is an endocrine disruptor for all chemicals for which complete data is available by the end of 2017, the plan does not include an estimate of the number of chemicals for which there will be completed data.

EPA's plan could be enhanced by making a commitment to finalizing risk assessments for many of the chemicals identified in the 2012 Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) work plan. EPA should also prioritize the completion of assessments for previously identified flame retardants and certain other chemicals included in the 2013 TSCA work plan.

#### *Goal 5: Protecting Human Health and the Environment by Enforcing Laws and Assuring Compliance*

The fifth goal outlined in EPA's Strategic Plan focuses on inspection and enforcement. Over the next five years, EPA plans to target only the largest environmental violations, conducting fewer inspections and initiating fewer enforcement cases than in past years. EPA's justification for this dramatic reduction in compliance and enforcement relies on the purported (and untested) benefits thought to come from electronic monitoring in its "Next Generation" (NextGen) compliance program. Although NextGen has the potential to provide innovative approaches for ensuring compliance, these approaches – especially voluntary reporting and compliance – should not be viewed as substitutes for traditional inspection and enforcement activities. NextGen compliance approaches depend on receiving complete, accurate data from regulated entities and states.

As shown in the table below, the plan suggests EPA will conduct 15,000 inspections and evaluations each year between 2014 and 2018, compared to the annual average of 21,000 inspections and evaluations completed between 2005 and 2009. In 2012, EPA conducted 19,835 inspections and evaluations.

The substantial reduction in compliance and enforcement is the most troubling part of the entire EPA plan, as on-the-ground inspections and enforcement actions are the only proven strategies for enforcing our nation's environmental laws. By conducting thousands fewer inspections and evaluations each year, EPA will not be able to boost compliance rates; they could regress and undermine decades of gains in environmental quality and compliance assurance.

The plan would also reduce the number of judicial and civil enforcement actions the agency initiates and concludes each year. Between 2014 and 2018, EPA will initiate 2,800 and complete 2,720 cases annually instead of the average of 3,900 cases initiated and 3,800 cases it concluded each year in 2005-2009.

**Table 1. Comparison of EPA's Strategic Measures  
for Inspections and Enforcement Actions**

<b>Strategic Measure</b>	<b>2005-2009 Baseline</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>Draft Plan 2014-2018</b>	<b>Final Plan 2014-2018</b>	<b>Recommended Target</b>
Average Annual No. of Inspections and Evaluations	21,000	20,000	18,000	14,000	15,800	20,000
Average Annual No. of Initiated Enforcement Cases	3,900	3,000	2,400	2,320	2,800	3,000
Average Annual No. of Concluded Enforcement Cases	3,800	3,000	2,500	2,000	2,720	3,000

As a result of these reductions in inspection and enforcement activities over the next five years, the agency has lowered its performance targets for reducing pollutants. EPA expects to achieve waste reductions of 2.9 billion pounds annually between 2014 and 2018. Although this is greater than what EPA achieved in 2013, it is substantially lower than the 6.5 billion pounds of waste reduced in 2008 and the 4.4 billion pounds of waste reduced in 2012.

Moreover, EPA's final plan only estimates toxic and pesticide pollutant reductions of 2.8 million pounds per year between 2014 and 2018. Between 2005 and 2008, EPA achieved an annual average reduction of 3.8 million pounds, and in 2013, EPA achieved much higher reductions – approximately 4.6 million pounds. Further, the plan estimates a reduction in water pollutants by 256 million pounds per year between 2014 and 2018. In 2012, EPA reduced water pollutants by 500 million pounds, and in 2013, EPA achieved reductions totaling 660 million pounds.

## **Conclusion**

EPA's Strategic Plan for 2014-2018 outlines five forward-looking goals, but more ambitious performance measures related to each of these goals are needed to ensure public health and the environment are adequately protected over the next five years. Additionally, the significant reduction in inspection and enforcement targets sends a message that EPA is scaling back its enforcement presence on the ground. To enhance environmental safeguards and prevent avoidable disasters like the ones in West, TX; Charleston, WV; and Eden, NC, Congress must designate adequate levels of funding to EPA so the agency has the resources it needs to fulfill its critical mission.



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