

Pruitt's Big Ag message raises red flags for congressmen

Lawmakers are calling for an investigation into whether the EPA conducted 'covert propaganda' with a lobbying group.

[NATASHA GEILING](https://thinkprogress.org/lawmakers-request-ethics-review-of-pruitt-beef-video-d8df2274f0d4/), ThinkProgress OCT 13, 2017  
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Top Democratic lawmakers are asking for a government probe of Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt's [interview](#) with a beef lobbying organization, in which Pruitt asked ranchers to comment on his proposed repeal of an Obama-era water regulation.

"We are deeply troubled that these recent EPA actions are the latest examples of EPA's inappropriate use of taxpayer resources," Reps. Peter DeFazio (D-OR), Betty McCollum (D-MN), Frank Pallone (D-NJ), and Elijah Cummings (D-MD) wrote in a letter sent to the Government Accountability.

"Here, EPA, by prominently featuring the Administrator in an online National Cattlemen's Beef Association video that ends by encouraging the public to visit the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's website, associated itself with that website and the hyperlinked pages therein that urged the public to contact Congress regarding pending Waters of the United States rulemaking," the [letter](#) says.

In the video, which was published on the National Cattlemen's Beef Association website in August, Pruitt shares inaccurate information about the Waters of the United States Rule, parroting industry talking-points like the idea that the rule would

have regulated a “puddle, a dry creek bed, and ephemeral drainage ditches across the country.”

In reality, the rule — which was finalized in 2015 — sought to clarify the legal extent of the government’s authority under the Clean Water Act and defined regulated bodies of water as anything having a “significant nexus” to navigable waters — things like seasonal streams or wetlands, but not puddles. At the time it was issued, the EPA said the new rule would protect drinking water sources for one out of every three Americans.

Pruitt has [proposed repealing](#) the Waters of the United States rule and appears set to issue a new rule that would significantly limit the federal government’s ability to regulate pollution in bodies of water across the country.

The video asks farmers and ranchers to provide comment on the repeal of the rule and directs viewers to the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s website, which urged users to “Take Action Now – Tell EPA to Kill WOTUS Today!” The website then offered sample comments that can be left for the EPA, as well as a link to the Federal Register. The public comment period for the proposed repeal closed September 27.

Federal law prohibits taxpayer dollars from being used, directly or indirectly, for “publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States.” In 2015, the Government Accountability Office found that the EPA, under Administrator Gina McCarthy, had engaged in “covert propaganda” and “grass-roots lobbying” by linking to an NRDC webpage that encouraged users to contact Congress about a bill that would have limited the EPA’s authority to spend money on implementing the Waters of the United States rule.

Pruitt’s appearance in the video has also raised red-flags with ethics experts, who noted that his behavior gave the

appearance of an industry that favors one sector of the public over another. Former EPA officials have already suggested that Pruitt and his political staff are telling career employees to give deference to certain comments over others, with [the Intercept reporting](#) that EPA appointees cherry-picked comments from industry for deeper consideration in regard to specific agency regulations that should be repealed.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association spent a total of [\\$396,269](#) on lobbying expenditures in 2016 and has been a vocal opponent of the Waters of the United States Rule. In general, big agribusiness has opposed the rule, arguing that it would make farming operations more difficult and costly due to increased regulation and permitting needs. Agriculture, however, was granted exemption under the Clean Water Act for things like plowing, maintenance of drainage ditches, and construction and maintenance irrigation ditches on dry land, and the Waters of the United States rule maintained those exemptions.

This is not the first time that Pruitt has found himself the subject of a requested ethics investigation in his relatively short tenure as EPA Administrator. He is currently under investigation for his frequent trips back to Oklahoma, his home state, using taxpayer dollars. That investigation was [recently expanded](#) to include all taxpayer-funded flights through September, which likely includes some of the flights that Pruitt reportedly took via [private chartered jet](#). Pruitt is also currently under investigation by the [Oklahoma Bar Association](#) for his use of a private email address during his time as Oklahoma Attorney General.