

Judicial Watch Obtains Records from EPA Showing Obama Agency's Illegal Use of Social Media Platform for Propaganda

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'I don't want it to look like EPA used our own social media accounts to reach our support goal' – EPA Director of Web Communications

(Washington, DC) — Judicial Watch obtained **900-pages** of documents from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which reveal the agency's use of the mass-sharing **Thunderclap** social media platform to covertly promote its policies **in violation** of federal law.

The documents show that EPA staffers, via the Thunderclap platform, recruited outside groups to lobby in support of the Clean Water Rule or "Waters of the United States." Thunderclap shares member messages across multiple Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr accounts simultaneously.

Federal law prohibits agencies from engaging in propaganda, which is defined as covert activity intended to influence the American public. Federal law also prohibits agencies from using federal resources to conduct grassroots lobbying to prod the American public to call on Congress to act on pending legislation.

The EPA's Director of Web Communications Jessica Orquina, in a September 10, 2014, email, wrote to Karen Wirth, an EPA team leader in the Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water, urging **the covert use** of the Thunderclap technology. "I don't want it to look like EPA used our own social media accounts to reach our support goal," Orquina wrote to Wirth.

The Clean Water Rule, now in the process of **being repealed** by the Trump administration, was a significant and legally controversial increase in federal authority over streams and other small bodies of water.

A December 2015 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded the EPA's use of Thunderclap to promote the Clean Water Rule "constitutes covert propaganda" and violated **federal law**.

The records were obtained by Judicial Watch in a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) **lawsuit** filed on June 21 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia after the EPA failed to respond to a May 3 FOIA request (**Judicial Watch vs. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** (No. 1:17-cv-01218)). Judicial Watch seeks:

All internal emails or other records concerning project administration, management, or assignment of tasks related to the EPA's use of the Thunderclap social media platform.

On September 9, 2014, Travis Loop, the EPA's director of communications for water, initiated the lobbying effort in **an email** to **Gary Belan**, senior director for the organization American Rivers, under the subject line "RE: IMPORTANT: Join a Thunderclap for Clean Water" that read:

EPA is planning to use a new social media application called Thunderclap to provide a way for people to show their support for clean water and the agency's proposal to protect it. Here's how it works: you agree to let Thunderclap post a one-time message on your social networks (Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr) on Monday, September 29 at 2:00 pm EDT. If 500 or more people sign up to participate, the message will be posted on everyone's walls and feeds at the same time. But if fewer than 500 sign up, nothing happens. So, it is important to both sign up and encourage others to do so.

In a September 10, 2014, **email** from Loop to Orquina, Loop asks "What's the best way to get the other agencies to sign up for the Thunderclap and promote on social media? Interior, USGS, NOAA, etc. I was

going to tweet at them to join the Thunderclap, but thought maybe you had thoughts on that and maybe a more direct line.” Orquina responds: “Why don’t I send a message to the interagency social media listserv?”

In a September 15, 2014, [email](#), Loop seeks assistance on the Thunderclap effort from the American Public Health Association (APHA). Loop writes to colleagues Brian Bond and Micah Ragland: “Can you reach out to your contact at the American Public Health Association and see if they can use their Twitter to support our Thunderclap for clean water? Basically we would love if they could sign up for their Twitter account to participate and then tweet to their followers an encouragement to participate? If how to do this is unclear I can talk to someone there. They have more than 440,000 followers so this would be a nice bump.”

In a September 25, 2014, [email](#) to Jay Jensen of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), Loop noted of the Thunderclap Clean Water effort: “Right now we have 840 people who have signed up and so the message will be seen by 1.7 million people. I’m trying to make this as big as possible, so anyone that can sign up and encourage others to sign up is appreciated. I know you have lots of connections all across the board that could make this even bigger.”

“The Obama EPA knowingly did an end run around federal law to push another Obama environmental power grab,” Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton said. “These documents show how these Obama-era bureaucrats seem to be more like social activists than public employees. Let’s hope President Trump does some major housecleaning at the EPA.”

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