Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

INSIGHT

EPA's Proposed Reorganization of Its Office of Research and Development

August 26, 2025

On May 2, 2025, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lee Zeldin announced and opined on a reorganization effort that would integrate scientific staff from EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) into existing EPA program offices (e.g., Office of Air and Radiation, Office of Water). Additionally, Administrator Zeldin announced the establishment of a new Office of Applied Science and Environmental Solutions (OASES) to "align research and put science at the forefront of the agency's rulemakings and technical assistance to states." Subsequently, on July 18, 2025, EPA announced a reduction in force (RIF) that "will impact" ORD. According to EPA, the agency expects the RIF and its ORD reorganization efforts to reduce spending. EPA's reorganization efforts may be of interest to Congress in its oversight role as it assesses agency staffing, funding, and activities to implement various environmental pollution control statutes (e.g., Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Solid Waste Disposal Act) to achieve a range of statutory objectives.

Typical ORD research and development (R&D) activities have included monitoring and modeling of pollutants and contaminants within the environment, assessing the toxicity of various pollutants and contaminants on human or ecological health, and developing and evaluating environmental remediation technologies. These R&D activities, whether they are conducted by ORD or some other entity (e.g., federal or state agency, academia, industry, nonprofit), may help EPA program offices assess whether environmental conditions necessitate a regulatory or response action and whether particular regulatory or response actions are effective. ORD generally has had discretion in determining which R&D projects to support with its funding and whether R&D projects would be conducted internally by its own staff or through external grants or cooperative agreements. ORD's current organization consists of four headquarters offices and four research centers, which are further divided into divisions and branches. While most divisions focus on specific scientific or engineering disciplines, some are regionally focused. According to EPA's FY2025 budget justification, the FY2025 funding requested for ORD was expected to support approximately 1,900 full-time equivalent employees. EPA has not publicly reported actual ORD staffing for FY2025.

Since its inception in 1970, EPA has maintained an office, led by an Assistant Administrator, dedicated to R&D activities to complement its program offices, which primarily focus on pollution control. Pursuant to Reorganization Plan No. 3 of 1970, which established EPA, certain laboratories, facilities, and other resources from multiple federal departments and agencies (e.g., Department of the Interior, Department of

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
IN12599

Agriculture) were transferred to EPA. Organizationally, most of the laboratories, facilities, and other resources were transferred to ORD, but certain laboratories were assigned to program offices for specific purposes (e.g., Office of Air and Radiation's National Vehicle and Fuel Emissions Laboratory).

In the late 1970s, multiple Environmental Research, Development, and Demonstration Authorization Acts (ERDDAAs) were enacted to explicitly authorize appropriations for EPA's various R&D activities and to provide direction on research planning and priorities within EPA. During this time, Congress directed EPA to invest in long-term environmental R&D activities to complement existing monitoring and data collection activities that support potential rulemaking and enforcement. Additionally, some pollution control statutes enacted during this time period, such as the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), included specific R&D authorities (e.g., TSCA §10, CERCLA §311) that complement their regulatory and enforcement authorities.

In the absence of annual ERDDAAs, Congress has influenced EPA's R&D activities through appropriations. Congress appropriates funding for integrated and transdisciplinary research program areas within the agency's Science and Technology (S&T) appropriations account. For FY2025, enacted appropriations for the research program areas within EPA's S&T account totaled $501.4 million. EPA's FY2026 budget request proposes $299.0 million (a 40.3% decrease) for these research program areas. For FY2026 appropriations, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have differed on whether to adopt the Administration's proposed funding levels for the research program areas and the process for reorganizing ORD. H.Rept. 119-215 proposes to adopt EPA's FY2026 budget request funding levels for the research program areas and expresses support for "the Agency's proposed Workforce reshaping to right-size the Agency and effectively carry out the Agency's statutory authorities." S.Rept. 119-46 proposes $491.4 million (a 2.0% decrease) for the research program area funding levels and would direct EPA to "immediately halt all actions related to the closure, reduction, reorganization, or other similar such changes to ORD and the EPA scientific workforce." S.Rept. 119-46 also notes that proposed changes to ORD could be included in EPA's FY2027 budget request for congressional consideration of FY2027 appropriations.

Different organizational frameworks to plan, manage, and conduct R&D activities at EPA have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of informing EPA decisionmaking under the statutes that the agency administers. Whether the proposed reorganization, in which R&D activities would be coordinated by OASES and managed within program offices rather than largely by one R&D office, would result in more efficiencies remains to be seen. Even if ORD were no longer to exist as a separate office within EPA, congressional oversight of EPA's R&D activities would still involve consideration of perennial issues, such as

- the appropriate level of funding for specific R&D activities and for R&D activities overall;
- the extent to which funding should be divided among basic research, applied research, technical assistance, and information dissemination;
- whether EPA's R&D staffing and activities would be more effective if centralized in one office or decentralized across EPA's program offices; and
- the adoption and implementation of measures (e.g., policies, guidance, programs) to ensure that the utility and quality of R&D activities within the agency are maximized.

Author Information

Jerry H. Yen
Analyst in Environmental Policy

Angela C. Jones
Specialist in Environmental Policy

Disclaimer