Via Electronic Mail
Administrator Michael S. Regan
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20460
Regan.Micheal@epa.gov

Dear Administrator Regan:

We write as representatives of communities plagued by PFAS pollution, communities concerned about future pollution, and those who have yet to discover contamination.\(^1\) Too little has been done to protect our communities for too long. This winter, your agency can change that. Although we appreciate the actions EPA has taken, they have not yet reduced PFAS exposure on the ground. The EPA’s upcoming permitting guidance for state agencies implementing the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) stands alone among the actions listed in the agency’s PFAS Strategic Roadmap as having the potential to result in near-term reductions in PFAS discharges.

Your experience in North Carolina is an example of the widespread challenges we face and the promise of the Clean Water Act. Communities in southeastern North Carolina were exposed to toxic levels of PFAS for decades. As recently as 2017, the Cape Fear River had PFAS concentrations near 1,000,000 parts per trillion. Now, thanks to your enforcement of the Clean Water Act, levels in the river have drastically declined—yet more must be done to protect communities downstream.

Your action in North Carolina made a significant difference to reduce exposure from a facility known to manufacture PFAS. But across the country, there are hundreds of facilities known or expected to manufacture or use PFAS and discharge them directly into our waters, and many publicly owned treatment works (POTWs) accept wastewater from industrial users who have PFAS in their wastewater. These facilities have mostly operated under the radar, with most states operating under a policy of: “if we don’t ask if you have it, we don’t have to control it,” when it comes to PFAS. This leaves communities with huge gaps in understanding of where their PFAS exposures are coming from.

\(^1\) The Southern Environmental Law Center submits this letter on behalf of the listed organizations. Please contact Geoff Gisler at ggisler@selcnc.org or 919-967-1450 with any questions or subsequent correspondence.
As demonstrated in North Carolina, the Clean Water Act and EPA’s existing regulations already provide the tools needed to stop the flow of PFAS pollution into our nation’s waters and ensure that polluters—regardless of whether they manufacture PFAS—bear the costs of preventing and controlling PFAS contamination. A permit recently issued to Chemours demonstrates the power of the Clean Water Act.\(^2\) Using the EPA’s NPDES Permit Writers’ Manual, the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality set technology-based effluent limits of 10 ppt for GenX, 10 ppt for PMPA, and 20 ppt for PFMOAA as indicator compounds. With these limits, Chemours will be required to reduce PFAS discharges to near or below the level of detection. Every community affected by PFAS contamination deserves this level of protection.

In April, EPA issued guidance for federal NPDES permits under the Clean Water Act that recognizes the need to identify and control sources of PFAS pollution, including industrial sources that discharge directly to waters and those that send waste through POTWs.\(^3\) Yet if EPA adopts this guidance nationwide, its reliance on best management practices over proven control technology, in particular, will slow cleanup of PFAS in our communities and deter state agencies from issuing protective permits like the one recently issued to Chemours.

EPA’s April memo was inconsistent with federal law in three critical ways that, if adopted by the forthcoming guidance, will protect polluters and interfere with ongoing efforts by communities to protect themselves. We request three changes:

- EPA must clarify that known or suspected sources have an ongoing obligation to disclose PFAS pollution as part of their existing NPDES permit and cannot delay disclosure until the next permit cycle.
- The guidance must set forth clear requirements to incorporate technology-based effluent limits (TBELs) on a case-by-case basis in NPDES permits for PFAS dischargers. Existing law and regulations explicitly state that TBELs are the minimum level of pollution control required, but they have not been consistently implemented for PFAS.\(^4\) Best management practices cannot substitute for TBELs.
- EPA must clarify that POTWs are required to evaluate the introduction of PFAS into their systems and use existing authority to ensure industrial users

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\(^4\) 40 C.F.R. §125.3.
pretreat PFAS waste consistent with the prohibition on pass-through or interference.

Enforcement and prompt implementation is also critical. For example, EPA manages the pretreatment program in New York, yet EPA Region 2 has not implemented the April guidance in any New York POTW permit.

PFAS pollution is a serious threat to our communities. The NPDES permitting guidance is the only action in the PFAS Strategic Roadmap that has the potential to reduce PFAS discharges in the near term under existing regulatory authority. Although valuable, EPA’s research efforts and National Testing Strategy will not reduce PFAS pollution in the immediate future. Effluent limitation guidelines will take many years to promulgate and will only cover certain industries. Classifying PFOA and PFOS as hazardous wastes will aid in cleanup for those two chemicals but much more needs to be done to stop the worsening crisis.

By March 2023, less than six years after the public learned of Chemours’ pollution, every major PFAS pollution pathway at the company’s site will be controlled through the appropriate permits. The N.C. Department of Environmental Quality and community groups used the authority in the Clean Water Act to make rapid progress cleaning up the worst environmental disaster in North Carolina history. But that approach is not being used consistently at other PFAS pollution sources in North Carolina or other states. Communities across the country deserve the protection of the Clean Water Act. We urge EPA to use its existing authority to ensure that protection by releasing guidance that clarifies states’ full responsibility under the Clean Water Act to stop PFAS pollution at the source.

Sincerely,

Jack West
Policy and Advocacy Director
Alabama Rivers Alliance
jwest@alabamarivers.org

Don Jodrey
Director of Federal Relations
Alliance for the Great Lakes
djodrey@greatlakes.org

Rachel Conn
Deputy Director
Amigos Bravos
rconn@amigosbravos.org

Mily Trevino-Sauceda
Executive Director
Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc.
mily@campesinasunite.org

Fletcher Sams
Executive Director and Riverkeeper
Altamaha Riverkeeper
Fletcher@altamahariverkeeper.org

Suzanne Kelly
President
Anacostia Riverkeeper
Riverkeeper@anacostiariverkeeper.org
Harriet Festing  
Executive Director  
Anthropocene Alliance  
Harriet@AnthropoceneAlliance.org

Nelson Brooke  
Riverkeeper  
Black Warrior Riverkeeper  
nbrooke@blackwarriorriver.org

Beth K. Stewart  
Executive Director  
Cahaba River Society  
beths@cahabariversociety.org

Myra Crawford  
Executive Director  
Cahaba Riverkeeper  
info@cahabariverkeeper.org

Jenn Engstrom  
State Director  
CALPIRG  
jengstrom@calpirg.org

Dana Sargent  
Executive Director  
Cape Fear River Watch  
dana@cfrw.us

Hannah Connor  
Senior Attorney, Environmental Health  
Center for Biological Diversity  
hconnor@biologicaldiversity.org

Arthur Bowman III  
Policy Director  
Center for Environmental Health  
arthur@ceh.org

Kevin Jeselnik  
General Counsel  
Chattahoochee Riverkeeper  
kjeselnik@chattahoochee.org

Jennifer Peters  
National Water Programs Director  
Clean Water Action/Clean Water Fund  
jpeters@cleanwater.org

Veronica Oakler  
Executive Director  
Clean Water for North Carolina  
veronica@cwfnc.org

Riley Lewis  
White Oak Waterkeeper  
Coastal Carolina Riverwatch  
rileyl@coastalcarolinariverwatch.org

Leigh-Anne Cole  
Acting Executive Director  
Community Action Works  
Leigh-anne@communityactionworks.org

Bill Stangler  
Riverkeeper  
Congaree Riverkeeper  
CRK@congareeriverkeeper.org

Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman  
Executive Director & Riverkeeper  
Coosa River Basin Initiative  
jesse@coosa.org

Justinn Overton  
Staff Riverkeeper & Executive Director  
Coosa Riverkeeper  
justinn@coosariver.org
Steven Pulliam
Dan Riverkeeper
steven@danriverkeeper.org

John Rumpler
Clean Water Director
Environment America Research & Policy Center
jrumpler@environmentamerica.org

Michael Lewis
Clean Air and Water Advocate
Environment Texas
mlewis@environmenttexas.org

Mary Grant
Public Water for All Campaign Director
Food & Water Watch
mgrant@fwwatch.org

Brionté McCorkle
Executive Director
Georgia Conservation Voters
brionte@gcvoters.org

K. Grace Stranch
COO and Vice President of Policy
Harpeth Conservancy
gracestranch@harpethriver.org

Matt Rota
Senior Policy Director
Healthy Gulf
matt@healthygulf.org

Sandy Bihn
Executive Director
Lake Erie Waterkeeper
sandylakeerie@aol.com

Sarah Woodbury
Director of Advocacy
Defend Our Health
Swoodbury@defendourhealth.org

Jennette Gayer
Director
Environment Georgia
jennette@environmentgeorgia.org

John E. Reeder
Vice President for Federal Affairs
Environmental Working Group
John.reeder@ewg.org

Liz Kirkwood
Executive Director
For Love of Water (FLOW)
liz@flowforwater.org

Rena Ann Peck
Executive Director
Georgia River Network
rena@garivers.org

Emily Sutton
Haw Riverkeeper
Haw River Assembly
emily@hawriver.org

Anna Killius
Director of Advocacy
James River Association
akillius@jrava.org

Madeleine Foote
Deputy Legislative Director
League of Conservation Voters
Madeleine_foote@lcv.org
Emily Scarr  
Director  
Maryland PIRG  
emily@marylandpirg.org

Katharine Lange  
Policy Specialist  
Massachusetts Rivers Alliance  
katharinelange@massriversalliance.org

Deirdre Cummings  
Legislative Director  
MASSPIRG  
dcummings@masspirg.org

Laurene Allen  
Cofounder  
Merrimack Citizens for Clean Water  
Alaurene@gmail.com

Tony Wilkin Gibart  
Executive Director  
Midwest Environmental Advocates, Inc.  
tgibart@midwestadvocates.org

Carly Griffith  
Water Program Director  
Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy  
cgriffith@mncenter.org

Karuna Ojanen  
Founder and Board of Directors  
Minnesota Well Owners Organization (MNWOO)  
Ojanen.mnwoo@gmail.com

Albert Ettinger  
General Counsel  
Mississippi River Collaborative  
Ettinger.Albert@gmail.com

Charles Miller  
Policy Manager  
Missouri Confluence Waterkeeper  
charles@mowaterkeeper.org

Gray Jernigan  
Central Regional Director  
MountainTrue  
gray@mountaintrue.org

Jennifer Hill  
Associate Director, Great Lakes Regional Center  
National Wildlife Federation  
watkinsg@nwf.org

Jon Devine  
Director of Federal Water Policy  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
jdevine@nrdc.org

Grady McCallie  
Policy Director  
NC Conservation Network  
grady@ncconservationnetwork.org

Kerri Allen  
Coastal Advocate/Regional Manager  
North Carolina Coastal Federation  
kerria@nccoast.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie Craig</td>
<td>State Director</td>
<td>North Carolina Public Interest Research Group (NCPIRG)</td>
<td>k <a href="mailto:craig@ncpirg.org">craig@ncpirg.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damon Mullis</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Ogeechee Riverkeeper</td>
<td><a href="mailto:damon@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org">damon@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Sandra L. Strauss</td>
<td>Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach</td>
<td>Pennsylvania Council of Churches</td>
<td><a href="mailto:s.strauss@pachurches.org">s.strauss@pachurches.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe DiNardo</td>
<td>Retired Toxicologist</td>
<td></td>
<td>jmj <a href="mailto:dinardo@aol.com">dinardo@aol.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April Ingle</td>
<td>Policy Director</td>
<td>River Network</td>
<td><a href="mailto:aingle@rivernetwork.org">aingle@rivernetwork.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara L. Walsh</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Rockbridge Conservation (RACC)</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Rockbridgeconservation@gmail.com">Rockbridgeconservation@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorette Picciano</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Rural Coalition</td>
<td>l <a href="mailto:picciano@ruralco.org">picciano@ruralco.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Bertrand</td>
<td>Satilla Riverkeeper</td>
<td>Satilla Riverkeeper</td>
<td><a href="mailto:riverkeeper@satillariverkeeper.org">riverkeeper@satillariverkeeper.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonya Lunder</td>
<td>Senior Toxics Policy Advisor</td>
<td>Sierra Club</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Sonya.lunder@sierraclub.org">Sonya.lunder@sierraclub.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Cedzo</td>
<td>Land, Water, Wildlife Senior Program Director</td>
<td>South Carolina Coastal Conservation League</td>
<td><a href="mailto:emilyc@scccl.org">emilyc@scccl.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara Green</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>South Carolina Wildlife Federation</td>
<td><a href="mailto:sara@scwf.org">sara@scwf.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoffrey R. Gisler</td>
<td>Senior Attorney</td>
<td>Southern Environmental Law Center</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ggisler@selcnc.org">ggisler@selcnc.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Sarah Cavrak</td>
<td>Vice Chair and Water Quality Coordinator</td>
<td>Surfrider – Cape Fear Chapter</td>
<td><a href="mailto:vicechair@capefear.surfrider.org">vicechair@capefear.surfrider.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie Day</td>
<td>Environmental Science and Policy Manager</td>
<td>Surfrider Foundation</td>
<td>k <a href="mailto:day@surfrider.org">day@surfrider.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>