

## EPA highlights stronger enforcement as Biden term nears end

BY MATTHEW DALY  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency enhanced enforcement efforts this year, doubling financial penalties issued to polluters and issuing the first-ever arrest for a climate change-related crime, the agency said in a report Thursday.

The EPA said it concluded more than 1,850 civil cases, a 3.4% increase over 2023, and charged 121 criminal defendants, a 17.6% increase over the previous year. The “revitalized enforcement and compliance efforts” resulted in the reduction or elimination of more than 225 million pounds of pollution in overburdened communities, the agency said in its final report on Biden-era enforcement actions before President-elect Donald Trump takes office in January.

The agency said it issued \$1.7 billion in fines

and penalties, more than double the 2023 total and the highest level in seven years.

Bolstered by 300 new employees hired since last year, the enforcement program focused on “21st century environmental challenges,” including climate change, environmental justice and chemical waste, said David Uhlmann, EPA’s assistant administrator for enforcement and compliance assurance. More than half the agency’s inspections and settlements involved poor and disadvantaged communities long scarred by pollution, reflecting the Biden administration’s emphasis on environmental justice issues.

Enforcement efforts included first-ever criminal charges for a climate change-related crime. A California man was charged in March with smuggling climate-damaging air coolants into the United States. The case



Matt Brown | Associated Press

Pump jacks extract oil from beneath the ground in North Dakota on May 19, 2021.

involved hydrofluorocarbons, a highly potent greenhouse gas also known as HFCs, a gas once commonly used in refrigerators and air conditioners.

A 2020 law passed by Congress prohibits importation of HFCs without allowances issued by the EPA. The law is part of a global phaseout designed to slow climate change.

Uhlmann called enforce-

ment of the HFC law a high priority for the United States and the world. “Alongside methane, HFCs are one of the most significant near-term drivers of climate change. And the criminal program is front and center there,” he said.

In other highlights, engine maker Cummins Inc. paid more than \$2 billion in fines and penalties — and agreed to recall

600,000 Ram trucks — as part of a settlement with federal and California authorities. Cummins was found to use illegal software that let Ram trucks — manufactured by Stellantis — to skirt diesel emissions tests for nearly a decade.

The fine is the largest ever secured under the federal Clean Air Act.

The EPA and Justice Department also reached a \$241.5 million settlement with Marathon Oil for alleged air quality violations at the company’s oil and gas operations on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota. The settlement requires Marathon to reduce climate- and health-harming emissions from those facilities and will result in over 2.3 millions tons worth of pollution reduction, officials said.

Uhlmann, who was confirmed as head of the enforcement office last year, said in an interview

that with the help of a spending boost approved by Congress, the agency has made “consequential changes in how we approach enforcement at EPA.”

“We’ve revitalized an enforcement program that suffered more than a decade of budget cuts and was badly hampered by the (COVID-19) pandemic,” he said. The agency also weathered a series of actions by former President Donald Trump’s administration to roll back environmental regulations and reduce overall staffing.

“We’ve strengthened the partnership between the criminal and civil programs, and we’ve also focused on moving our cases with greater urgency so that we provide meaningful results to communities in time frames that make sense to the people who are harmed when unlawful pollution occurs,” Uhlmann said.

## Secret Service outlines reforms after Trump assassination attempt

BY REBECCA SANTANA  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The acting director of the Secret Service said Thursday that the agency is “reorganizing and reimagining” its culture and how it operates following an assassination attempt against Donald Trump on the campaign trail.

Members of a bipartisan House task force investigating the attempt on Trump’s life pushed Ronald Rowe on how the agency’s staffers could have missed such blatant security vulnerabilities leading up to the July 13 shooting at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. At one point, the hearing devolved into a shouting match between Rowe and a Republican congressman.

Rowe promised accountability for what he called the agency’s “abject failure” to secure the rally in Butler, where a gunman opened fire from a nearby building. Trump was wounded in the ear, one rallygoer was killed and two others were wounded.

Another assassination attempt two months later contributed to the agency’s troubles. That gunman waited for hours for Trump to appear at his golf course in Florida, but a Secret Service agent

thwarted the attack by spotting the firearm poking through bushes.

The task force has been investigating both attempts, but it was the July shooting that dominated Thursday’s hearing. Its inquiry is one of a series of investigations and reports that have faulted the agency for planning and communications failures. The agency’s previous director resigned, and the Secret Service increased protections for Trump before the Republican won the November election.

Rowe was repeatedly asked by flabbergasted lawmakers how problems so obvious in hindsight were allowed to happen.

Rep. Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat, said it was “just wild to me” that at a time of tech advances, the Secret Service was using text messages and emails to communicate in real time about threats.

He also asked Rowe why so many things went wrong that day “yet nobody said anything.”

Rowe said the agency used to have a culture where people felt comfortable speaking up.

“I don’t know where we lost that,” he said. “We have to get back to that.”

Rowe said the agency is putting a much stronger emphasis

on training — something previous investigations found was lacking — and on doing more regular reviews of events to see what went right and where improvements can be made.

“We are reorganizing and reimagining this organization,” Rowe told lawmakers. He said the agency needs to identify possible leaders much earlier in their careers instead of just promoting people to command positions because they have been around a long time.

The hearing was largely cordial, with members of Congress stressing the bipartisan nature of their work and praising Rowe for cooperating with their investigation even as they pushed him for explanations.

But at one point, Rowe and Rep. Pat Fallon, a Texas Republican, faced off — shouting over each other as other members pleaded for order.

Fallon pulled out a photo of President Joe Biden, Trump and others at this year’s Sept. 11 ceremony in New York and asked Rowe why he was at the event, suggesting it was to burnish his prospects at getting the director job permanently. Trump has not yet named his pick to lead the agency.

“I was there to show respect for a Secret Service member that died on 9/11. Do not invoke 9/11 for political purposes!” Rowe shouted.

“You wanted to be visible because you were auditioning for this job that you’re not going to get!” Fallon later shot back.

Rowe roared back: “You are out of line, Congressman. You are out of line!”

“You’re a bully,” Fallon said.

This was the task force’s second public hearing and the first time that Rowe has addressed its members in public. The panel has until Dec. 13 to release its final report.

Rep. Mark Green, a Tennessee Republican, said the agency’s conduct during the July shooting seemed almost “lackadaisical.” He said some of the issues that went wrong that day were “really basic things.”

“It speaks of an apathy or a complacency that is really unacceptable in an organization like the Secret Service,” Green said.

The task force conducted 46 transcribed interviews, attended over a dozen briefings and reviewed over 20,000 documents. Members also visited the site of both assassination attempts and went to the FBI’s laboratory in

Quantico, Virginia, to look at evidence.

Rowe said Thursday that the agency’s internal investigation, whose findings were released last month, identified failures by multiple employees. He noted that the quality of the advance work — the people who scope out event locations ahead of time — did not meet agency standards. He vowed accountability for those who fell down on the job.

Many of the investigations have centered on why buildings near the rally with a clear line of sight to the stage where Trump was speaking were not secured in advance. The gunman, Thomas Crooks, climbed onto the roof of one of them and opened fire before being killed by a Secret Service counter-sniper.

Rowe pointed to the failure to protect the building as the most glaring oversight that day.

He also was asked about the morale of agents and new hires. Rowe said applications are actually up this year — the agency made a net gain of about 200 agents during the past fiscal year, meaning both new agents were hired and veteran agents retained.

## US to close women’s prison, other facilities amid abuse, decay

BY MICHAEL R. SISAK  
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ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The federal Bureau of Prisons is permanently closing its “rape club” women’s prison in California and will idle six facilities in a sweeping realignment after years of abuse, decay and mismanagement, The Associated Press has learned.

The agency informed employees and Congress on Thursday that it plans to shutter the Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin, California, and its deactive minimum-security prison camps in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Florida. Staff and inmates are being moved to other facilities, the agency said.

In a document obtained by the AP, the Bureau of Prisons said it was taking “decisive and strategic action” to address “significant challenges, including a critical staffing shortage, crumbling infrastructure and limited budgetary resources.” The agency said it is not downsizing and is committed to finding positions for every affected employee.

The closures are a striking coda to the Biden administration’s stewardship of the Justice Department’s biggest agency. After repeatedly promising to reform FCI Dublin and other troubled facilities, Bureau of Prisons Director Colette Peters is pivoting to closures and consolidation, citing inadequate staffing and staggering costs to repair aging infrastructure.

The permanent shutdown of FCI Dublin seven months after a temporary closure in the wake of staff-on-inmate abuse that led to the “rape club” moniker is the

clearest sign yet that the agency — which has more than 30,000 employees, 158,000 inmates and an annual budget of about \$8 billion — is unable or unwilling to rehabilitate its most problematic institutions.

The move comes three years after the agency closed its troubled New York jail in Manhattan after myriad problems came to light in the wake of Jeffrey Epstein’s suicide there, including lax security, staffing shortages and squalid, unsafe conditions such as falling concrete and busted cells.

At the same time, the agency recently committed to building a new medium-security prison facility and minimum-security camp for about 1,400 inmates in Roxana, Kentucky, citing a need for “modern facilities and infrastructure,” with \$500 million earmarked by Congress for construction.

The Bureau of Prisons and the correctional workers union have repeatedly pushed for additional federal prison funding, highlighting what they say is an inadequate amount of money to address pay increases, staff retention and a multibillion-dollar repair backlog. More than half of federal prison facilities were built before 1991 and many are becoming outmoded or obsolete, the agency said.

The agency said it expects that reassigning employees to remaining facilities will boost retention and cut down on mandatory overtime and augmentation, a practice by which cooks, teachers, nurses and other prison workers are assigned to guard inmates.

In a document summarizing

the closures, the Bureau of Prisons said it decided to close FCI Dublin after a security and infrastructure assessment following its temporary closure in April. At the time, it appeared the agency was set on closing the low-security prison, but officials held out the possibility that it could be repaired and reopened for a different purpose, such as housing male inmates.

The assessment identified considerable repairs necessary to reopen the FCI Dublin, the agency said. Low staffing, exacerbated by the high cost of living in the Bay Area, also contributed to the decision to close the facility, the agency said. Other facilities being

“As the agency navigates a challenging budgetary and staffing environment, we must make incredibly difficult decisions. FCI Dublin will not reopen,” the agency said.

FCI Dublin’s permanent closure represents an extraordinary acknowledgement by the Bureau of Prisons that it has failed to fix the facility’s culture and environment in the wake of AP reporting that exposed rampant sexual abuse within its walls. Hundreds of people who were incarcerated at FCI Dublin are suing the agency, seeking reforms and monetary compensation for mistreatment at the facility.

The closures at FCI Dublin and across the federal prison system come amid an AP investigation that has uncovered deep, previously unreported flaws within the Bureau of Prisons. AP reporting has disclosed widespread criminal activity by employees, dozens of escapes, chronic violence, deaths and

severe staffing shortages that have hampered responses to emergencies, including assaults and suicides.

In July, President Joe Biden signed a law strengthening oversight of the agency after AP reporting spotlighted its many flaws.

In addition to closing FCI Dublin, the Bureau of Prisons is shuttering its minimum-security prison camps in Pensacola, Florida, Duluth, Minnesota, and Morgantown, West Virginia. It is also suspending operations at minimum-security satellite camps that are adjacent to federal prisons in Oxford, Wisconsin, Littleton, Colorado, and Loretto, Pennsylvania.

Such facilities, built for the lowest risk offenders with dormitory-style housing and little or no fencing, have been the site of frequent escapes and an influx of contraband.

The Bureau of Prisons said the buildings at its Pensacola camp, which are owned by the Navy, are in “significant disrepair” and will be demolished after about 500 prisoners and 100 staff members are relocated to other facilities.

The Duluth camp is also plagued by “aging and dilapidated infrastructure,” including several condemned buildings that are contaminated with asbestos and lead paint, the agency said. About 736 inmates and 90 staff members will be moved to other facilities.

The Morgantown camp is closing and about 400 inmates and 150 employees will be relocated to “maximize existing resources” at the federal prison complex in Hazelton, West Virginia, about 23 miles away.

## KETTLE

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While Griffin is motivated to ring the bell with the knowledge he is helping raise funds, he finds enjoyment in being able to bring happiness to people who pass by.

“... I can just bring joy to people, and make people laugh and cut up with ‘em,” he said. “For Heaven’s sake, it’s Christmastime. We gotta have a little fun, and joy and laughter ...”

Haworth said a majority of this year’s bell ringers are made up of paid workers like Griffin, but said volunteer opportunities are very much available.

“We would love to have more volunteer kettle workers,” he said.

Haworth said the funds raised will help pay for the organization’s Christmas relief efforts among other needs.

“... It helps cover our overhead and (our) two full-time and one part-time employees ... so that we can help people with food boxes, utility assistance, rental assistance throughout the whole year,” he said.

Kettles accept cash and checks but they are also equipped with QR codes that are able to read smartphones and accept transactions through Apple Pay, Google Pay and debit cards.

Checks can be made out to The Salvation Army of Owensboro. Donations can also be accepted virtually at [tinyurl.com/kn5uv2jn](http://tinyurl.com/kn5uv2jn).

If interested in being a volunteer bell ringer, visit [registertor.org](http://registertor.org). For more general information about the Red Kettle campaign, contact the Salvation Army of Owensboro at 270-685-5576 or visit [facebook.com/salvation-armyowensboro](http://facebook.com/salvation-armyowensboro).