



# PEERREPORT

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

## ATTACK ON CLIMATE SCIENCE

The Trump administration's pro-industry, anti-science agenda has undermined the work of every federal agency that conducts climate science and has a broad chilling effect on agency personnel. President Trump himself **questioned** the scientific consensus on climate change, misrepresented facts, **removed all references to climate change** from the White House website, repeatedly called climate change a "**hoax**," and **said** of the Fourth National Climate Assessment—his own government's report—"I don't believe it."

PEER is fighting back against the administration's war on climate science. We provide legal help and advice to scientists and government employees who fear interference or retaliation in their work because it involves climate science, and we ensure that documents and information being suppressed by the government are released to the public. This is part of our broad effort to stand with those public servants who work to ensure scientific integrity in the government's decision-making processes.

Below is an overview of how the Trump Administration is working to hinder, minimize, and obstruct climate science in the Federal government.

### ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

The attacks on climate science have had a significant effect on the work of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), first under Scott Pruitt, and continuing under Andrew Wheeler. Pruitt came into the EPA as an **outspoken climate denier**. PEER filed a FOIA request seeking copies of the studies on which Administrator Pruitt based his claim that human activity is not the primary contributor to climate change. On June 1, 2018, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia Circuit ordered EPA to comply with PEER's FOIA request. EPA was unable to come up with any documents to support Pruitt's statements.

On May 6, 2017, *The Washington Post* **reported** that EPA had buried climate change information on an archived version of its website, after it **removed** its climate change pages in April. By October, Pruitt had overseen the scrubbing of the whole EPA website to remove discussions of climate change, **according to** the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI). This scrubbing continued under Wheeler, as a second EDGI report [reveals](#).

The agency edited its “Science Matters” website to eliminate the category of climate change researchers, moving its scientists into other categories such as Ecosystems and Health, even though the nature of their work did not change. EDGI also notes that

EPA’s Heat Island Effect website has been altered to downplay the effect of climate change on urban heat islands.

Pruitt also **sidelined** scientists and career staffers within the agency, **canceled** talks on climate change by agency scientists, **barred** anyone receiving grant money from serving on advisory panels, **canceled** research grants, and **dismissed** members of its Science Advisory Board (SAB), replacing them with industry members. *CBS News* **reported** that the head of EPA’s Board of Scientific Counselors said she had been pressured by the agency’s chief of staff to change her testimony before Congress on May 23 “to downplay the Trump administration’s decision not to reappoint half of the board’s members.”

Following the shakeup of the SAB, its acting director then **disbanded** the EPA’s Ecological Processes and Effects Committee, Environmental Engineering Committee, and Environmental Economics Advisory Committee.

Wheeler appointed eight new members to the SAB on January 31, 2019. One of the new members, John Christy, was **described** by *BuzzFeed* as “a climate science skeptic with a history of botched research.” *E&E News* **quoted** Christy as saying, “There’s a benefit, not a cost, to producing energy from carbon.”

On March 28, 2018, *Huffington Post* **published** a leaked memorandum indicating that the EPA’s Office of Public Affairs developed a set of approved talking points on climate change. *Huffington Post* observed that the talking points appear to be intended to cast doubt on the scientific consensus on climate change and humans’ contribution to it.

On September 27, 2018, *The Washington Post* **reported** that the EPA planned to close its Office of the Science Advisor (OSA), prompting House Democrats to write to Andrew Wheeler on October 18 to express their “strong opposition” to the move. Currently, however, the EPA website continues to show this office as active.

As recently as March 20, 2019, *Time* **quoted** Wheeler as saying that climate change is “an important issue,” but most of the threats it poses are “50 to 75 years out” and it’s “unreasonable” for the 2020 Democratic candidates to focus so much on it.

EPA scientists have left the agency in droves under the Pruitt and Wheeler administrations. *The Washington Post* **reported** that as of January 2020,

“nearly 700 scientists have left in the past three years. . . The EPA has hired 350 replacements.”

On April 30, 2018, the EPA proposed a **rule**, *Strengthening Transparency in Regulatory Science*, to provide that “EPA will ensure that the regulatory science underlying its actions is publicly available in a manner sufficient for independent validation.” *The Atlantic* **reported** that dozens of scientific and medical leaders opposed the rule because it would prohibit the EPA from using a large amount of peer-reviewed scientific research. The proposed rule would require scientific studies that support “pivotal regulatory science” to publish their underlying data, models, and assumptions, causing problems for medical researchers who promised to protect their patients’ information.

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On December 31, 2019, EPA’s SAB, notably dominated by Trump appointees, released a **report** expressing numerous concerns about the proposed rule. The SAB wrote that “greater clarity is needed” for multiple proposed requirements, and that the requirement to make publicly available all studies relied upon could be “cumbersome and impractical,” and it is “difficult to understand the implications.”

## DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Over at the Department of the Interior (DOI), discussions about changing the agency website began even before Ryan Zinke’s appointment as agency head. A *Washington Post* **article** from March 9, 2018, highlighted the role of an Office of Policy Analysis senior advisor and long-time climate skeptic within the agency, Indur Goklany, in working with the Trump team early in 2017 to change the DOI website.

Once in office, Zinke’s ham-handed attempts to squash anything related to climate change prompted Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) to publish a December 2018 **report** focused entirely on DOI. UCS documents the removal of climate-related language from agency communications, websites and policies, the **rebuke** of **National Park Service** (NPS) staff for tweeting about climate change, the elimination of a proposed rule designed to reduce methane emissions from oil and gas drilling, and issuance of an order limiting the research that can be considered in rulemaking. Most recently, **according to** UCS, The National Park Service’s acting deputy director, David Vela, issued a memo that requires NPS staff, including scientists, to seek permission from supervisors in Washington DC if they want to submit public comments on certain policies at other federal agencies, including policies related to energy and development activities.

Other reported incidents at DOI also involve the National Park Service. On April 2, 2018, *Reveal* **reported** that officials at the NPS had removed all references to humans’ role in causing climate change from a report drafted in 2016 that

addressed the impact of sea level rise and flooding on coastal national parks. The report was later published on the NPS website in its original form. Another *Reveal* article dated February 14, 2019, **reports** that the author of the report, University of Colorado scientist Maria Caffrey, was told her contract with NPS would not be renewed. Caffrey attributed this to her refusal to accept edits.

One of Zinke's most egregious actions involved the reassignment of scientific staff to unrelated jobs. One of these scientists was Joel Clement. In a *Washington Post* **op-ed** dated July 19, 2017, Clement said he was one of "about 50 senior department employees who received letters informing us of involuntary reassignments." Clement added, "A few days after my reassignment, Interior Secretary **Ryan Zinke testified** before Congress that the department would use reassignments as part of its effort to eliminate employees; the only reasonable inference from that testimony is that he expects people to quit in response to undesirable transfers."

Clement did leave DOI, and joined UCS, but he also sued DOI. Meanwhile, DOI's Office of Inspector General investigated the reassignments, but its **report** said it was not able to determine whether the reassignments violated federal guidelines, because the board responsible for the reassignments did not keep proper records of its decisions.

Although Zinke is gone, DOI under Secretary David Bernhardt continues to deny the evidence and serious implications of climate change. In September 2019, DOI's **Bureau of Land Management (BLM)** **released** its final environmental impact statement for the sale of drilling rights in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's Coastal Plain. The **report** insisted "there is not a climate crisis" and pointed to archeological evidence of farming in Greenland and vineyards in England in the years before Europe's Little Ice Age as evidence that "societies prospered" with warming.

EDGI's 2019 **report** found DOI had removed mentions of climate change from its WaterSmart program webpage, which had previously discussed the impact of climate change on future water demands.

EDGI's new report also notes that DOI's **United States Geological Survey (USGS)** removed the topic of climate change and all climate change links from its "**Science Explorer**" webpage. *E&E News* **reported** that USGS removed references to climate change from a press release and delayed the release of a study of the impact of climate change on California's coastline. The action "reflects a pattern at USGS" of omitting references to climate change from news releases.

*The New York Times* **reported** USGS director James Reilly has ordered that scientific assessments should project the impacts of climate change only through 2040, instead of through the end of the century, as had been done

previously. The shorter time-frame will mask the accelerating effects of climate change.

In a November 12, 2019 [letter](#), DOI [notified](#) 159 DC-based BLM employees that they would be relocated to its new headquarters in Grand Junction, CO, or to regional offices out West. There are major concerns about the motivation behind the move, with Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) [stating](#) that the decisions “are meant to displace seasoned scientists,” and [ThinkProgress reporting](#) that the relocation would “lead to a mass-exodus of agency experts unwilling to relocate.”

## DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Like other agencies, the Department of Energy (DOE) [expunged](#) climate information from its website, including discussion of the Paris Agreement. [According to Politico](#), a supervisor at the Energy Department's Office of International Climate and Clean Energy told employees not to include the words “climate change,” “emissions reduction,” or “Paris Agreement” in written communications.

[The Atlantic reported](#) that the Energy Information Administration reworked its “Energy Kids” web page to delete climate information, including information connecting coal to greenhouse gas emissions. EDGI's July 2019 report found DOE removed climate change from the description of what scientists do in its [Biological and Environmental Research](#) (BER) group, as well as references to climate modeling. “Climate change” was replaced with “environment,” and one of the research facilities operated by BER underwent a name change from “ARM Climate Research Facility” to “ARM Research Facility.”

In addition, the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board was informally disbanded in January of 2017. Two years later, in February of 2019, DOE [announced](#) that the board will be reestablished.

While he was Secretary, Rick Perry focused much of his efforts on promoting coal in keeping with Trump's priorities, but he also cut funding for climate research.

In December 2017, EOS [reported](#) that the U.S. Department of Energy was canceling a \$100 million research project, launched in 2015 and due to continue until 2025. The project, known as “[Next-Generation Ecosystem Experiment–Tropics](#)” (NGEE-Tropics), brought together over 130 scientists from DOE's national laboratories and external organizations to study how tropical forests will respond to climate change.

On June 15, 2017, DOE [closed](#) the Office of International Climate and Technology (OICT), and informed its 11 staff members that their positions were being eliminated. OICT was formed in 2010 to provide technical advice on

greenhouse gas emissions reductions and worked with other countries to develop clean energy technologies. The shuttering of OICT follows a March 2017 **directive** from a DOE supervisor telling OICT staff not to use the phrases “climate change,” “emissions reduction,” or “Paris Agreement” in written memos, briefings, or other written communication.

According to an August 25, 2017 **article** in *Nature*, senior managers at one of the national labs asked multiple researchers receiving DOE grants to remove references to “climate change” and “global warming” from the description of their projects.

An **article** attributed to *E&E News* later reported that Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requested emails suggested the request was prompted by President Trump’s budget request and was intended to protect scientists against future grant cuts. DOE responded, stating, “There is no departmental-wide policy banning the term ‘climate change’ from being used in DOE materials.”

On February 13, 2019, DOE published a proposed rule to update and modernize its rulemaking methodology, specifically relating to energy efficiency standards for residential and commercial appliances and equipment. On January 15, 2020, DOE issued its final “Process Rule” which the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) described as a “roadblock” to future energy efficiency standards. NRDC also summarized the new rule as substantially increasing the energy savings threshold required to trigger the protocols, and basically allowing “manufacturers to design the test procedures used to determine if their products meet standards.”

## DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has recently been in the **press** for reassigning Washington, DC-based scientists from its Economic Research Service (ERS) to Kansas City in an apparent effort to get them to quit. An August 2019 *AP* **article** quoted acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney as admitting that the move was in fact a deliberate attempt to gut the agency’s existing workforce. As of January 2020, the *Washington Post* **reports** that two-thirds of scientists in USDA’s key research departments have now left. *ThinkProgress* **reported** that “some scientists see the ERS move as a foreshadowing of wider repercussions for research that doesn’t align with the administration’s broader ‘energy dominance’ agenda.”

Even before that, however, the Department had begun undermining the work of its own scientists. UCS **reports** that USDA issued a memo in July 2018 requiring its scientists to label their peer-reviewed scientific publications as “preliminary,” a policy that was only **overturned** in May of 2019, following a public outcry.

On June 23, 2019, *Politico* **reported** that “[t]he Trump administration has refused to publicize dozens of government-funded studies that carry warnings about the effects of climate change, defying a longstanding practice of touting such findings by the Agriculture Department’s acclaimed in-house scientists.”

A month later, *Politico* further **revealed**, “[t]he Agriculture Department quashed the release of a sweeping plan on how to respond to climate change that was finalized in the early days of the Trump administration, according to a USDA employee with knowledge of the decision . . . . The USDA has also moved away from using phrases like climate change, climate, and greenhouse gas emissions in press releases and social media posts.”

None of this should come as a surprise, given that USDA Secretary Sonny Purdue **reportedly** told a *CNN* reporter that “we don’t know” the cause of climate change, and that “I think it’s weather patterns, frankly.”

Climate denialism has also affected the **U.S. Forest Service**, an agency within USDA. An article in the *Houston Chronicle* **recounts** that “a U.S. Forest Service administrator allegedly directed agency employees to remove references to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions from proposals to open national forests and grasslands in Texas to new rounds of oil and natural gas drilling.” A draft public notice that mentioned the need “to address new greenhouse gas science and climate trends in the analysis and management direction” was later replaced with a version omitting that language. The article cites an email obtained by the Center for Biological Diversity through a FOIA request in which a Forest Service employee wrote, “[t]he deputy who is reviewing the [notice of intent] requested every reference to ‘climate’ and ‘greenhouse gases’ be removed.”

The 2019 EDGI report notes the U.S. Forest Service changed its “**Wilderness**” webpage to remove “global warming change” from a list of changes that affect the ecological character and function of wilderness.

## DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

For many years, and spanning both Republican and Democratic administrations, the Department of Defense (DOD) has been a leader on climate change, taking seriously the national security threats posed by severe weather events, sea level rise, and increasing political instability across the globe. Now, even DOD seems to have fallen victim to Trump denialism. On May 10, 2018, the *Washington Post* **reported** that numerous references to “climate change” were removed from a Department of Defense document outlining how climate change is affecting military bases and installations. More recently, *E&E News* **reported** that the U.S. Navy shut down its Task Force on Climate Change in March of 2019. The task force was created in 2009 to plan “future public, strategic, and policy discussions” around climate change, and had released

several reports on the dangers posed by climate change and sea level rise to strategic planning and naval installations.

## THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) placed the former head of the Climate and Health Program, Dr. George E. Luber, on indefinite administrative leave shortly after CDC merged the program with its National Asthma Control Program. After several months of investigation into his alleged misconduct, Dr. Luber was notified that the agency would be removing him. The factual predicate for the removal was clearly spurious, and after reporters for *The New York Times*, supported by PEER, inquired about his removal, the agency withdrew the proposed termination. Before being placed on administrative leave, Dr. Luber had repeatedly objected to rollbacks in CDC's public health practice relating to climate change. Dr. Luber has now been blocked from performing his duties by Center leadership for more than a year.

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## OTHER AGENCIES

The administration's attacks on climate science may have had a chilling effect throughout the government. On November 29, 2017, *NPR* **reported** that "[s]cientists appear to be self-censoring by omitting the term "climate change" in public grant summaries." According to *NPR*, forty percent fewer grants containing the words "climate change" were funded by the **National Science Foundation** in 2017, compared to 2016. The use of alternative terms, such as "extreme weather," in grants was found to be rising.

The Climate Tracker documents many instances where other U.S. government offices have removed mentions of climate change as a priority or even an item of discussion, in a departure from past work. Early in 2017, the **Council on Environmental Quality** **withdrew** Obama-era guidance requiring agencies to include greenhouse gases and climate change in reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act.

On August 20, 2017, *The Washington Post* **reported** that the Trump administration had disbanded the fifteen-person Advisory Committee for the Sustained National Climate Assessment, which assisted state and local officials in using the National Climate Assessment in long-term planning. (An April 4, 2019 article in *The Guardian* **notes**, "[t]he advisory group has since been resurrected, however, following an invitation from New York's governor, Andrew Cuomo, and has been financially supported by Columbia University and the American Meteorological Society. It now has 20 expert members.")

*The Guardian* reported that on December 18, 2017, President Trump unveiled a new National Security Strategy, which **omitted** "climate change" as a threat.

In June of 2019, White House officials barred a State Department scientist from providing written testimony to the House Intelligence Committee warning that human-caused climate change is “possibly catastrophic.” **According to *The Washington Post***, “Trump administration officials sought to cut several pages of the document on the grounds that its description of climate science did not mesh with the administration’s official stance. Critics of the testimony included **William Happer**, a **National Security Council** senior director who has touted the benefits of carbon dioxide and sought to establish a federal task force to challenge the scientific consensus that human activity is driving the planet’s rising temperatures.”

On July 31, 2018, the White House **Office of Management and Budget** (OMB) and **Office of Science and Technology Policy** (OSTP) jointly issued a **memorandum** outlining the Trump Administration’s research and development priorities for fiscal year 2020 that omitted climate change, a departure from the previous administration.

On May 9, 2018, *Science* **reported** that the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** (NASA) had canceled a \$10 million-a-year research program aimed at improving carbon monitoring. On May 30, 2018, *The Guardian* **reported** that there has been a “noticeable decline” in the amount of climate change information published by NASA since President Trump took office. *The Guardian* quotes a former NASA employee who says she was warned not to discuss climate change on social media. The employee was reportedly told that “with Trump as president, climate change is now a sensitive subject.” She indicated that career staff wanted to avoid references to climate change as they were “nervous about provoking the new administration.”

The **U.S. Agency for International Development** (USAID) **removed** references to “climate change” in its 2017 sustainability **report**. In a departure from USAID’s 2016 **report**, the 2017 version no longer lists “climate change adaptation” as a priority.

On March 15, 2018, the **Federal Emergency Management Agency** (FEMA) published a new **strategic plan** in which all references to “climate change” and “global warming” had been **removed**. FEMA’s **2019 Emergency Preparedness Report notes** the increase in the number of severe weather incidents but **omits** all reference to the changes in climate and sea level rise driving that increase.

In July of 2018, U.S. **Department of the Treasury** **removed** references to “climate change” from its 2017 sustainability report and deleted “climate change resilience” as a goal.

In September of 2019, the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** (NOAA) Fisheries Director **said** at a Senate hearing that he “could not say whether climate change is endangering the nation’s fisheries and

declined to ‘speculate’ on whether warming oceans will harm fish stocks or generate more hurricanes.”

According to EDGI’s 2019 report, the Department of Labor’s **Occupational Safety and Health Administration** (OSHA) removed all references to climate change from its **webpage** that details with how employers and workers can deal with heat related illnesses.

The EDGI report also noted that **U.S. Global Change Research Program** (USGCRP), the inter-agency effort that produces the National Climate Assessments, altered its webpage titled “**Understanding Climate Change**” to remove the section on the program’s role in combatting climate change. According to the report, “[a] link to a website explaining USGCRP’s role in managing climate change impacts was also restricted from public access even though it discussed ongoing legal mandates to develop global change science for the public.”

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Even when federal agencies propose to acknowledge climate change, the Trump White House actively suppresses all mention of the term. On October 2, 2019, *E&E News* **reported** that the White House deleted the words “[w]hile global climate change is a serious challenge” from a proposal to preempt California’s clean cars program. A footnote linking to the Fourth National Climate Assessment was also deleted.

A study conducted by the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative found that use of the terms “climate change,” “clean energy,” and “adaptation” dropped by 26% between 2016 and 2018 on federal environmental websites, undermining the availability of accurate climate information under President Trump’s administration.

Trump’s attacks on climate science have continued into the new decade with the Administration’s all-out assault on the **National Environmental Policy Act** (NEPA). Among other changes meant to lessen the effectiveness of this bedrock environmental law, the proposed rule would allow federal agencies to **ignore** climate change when assessing the environmental impacts of major infrastructure projects.