

Trump Administration's Strategy on Climate: Try to Bury Its Own Scientific Report



President Trump this month in Paradise, Calif., the site of devastating fires. Friday's report cites the changing climate as a contributing factor in such disasters. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

By Coral Davenport
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WASHINGTON — The Trump White House, which has defined itself by a willingness to dismiss scientific findings and propose its own facts, on Friday issued a scientific report that directly contradicts its own climate-change policies.

That sets the stage for a remarkable split-screen political reality in coming years. The administration is widely expected to discount or ignore the report's detailed findings of the economic strain caused by climate change, even as it continues to cut environmental regulations, while opponents use it to mount legal attacks against the very administration that issued the report.

"This report will be used in court in significant ways," said Richard L. Revesz, an expert in environmental law at New York University. "I can imagine a lawyer for the Trump administration being asked by a federal judge, 'How can the federal government acknowledge the seriousness of the problem, and then set aside the rules that protect the American people from the problem?' And they might squirm around coming up with an answer."

The [1,656-page National Climate Assessment](#), which is required by Congress, is the most comprehensive scientific study to date detailing the effects of global warming on the United States economy, public health, coastlines and infrastructure. It describes in precise detail how the warming planet will wreak hundreds of billions of dollars of damage in coming decades.

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President Trump has often [questioned or mocked](#) the basic science of human-caused climate change, and is now working aggressively to encourage the burning of coal and the increase of greenhouse gas pollution.

Historians and veterans of public service said it was notable that policymakers didn't try to soften the report's conclusions, because that indicated the strength of the administration's belief that it could ignore the findings in favor of policies driven by political ideology. "This is a new frontier of disavowance of science, of disdain for facts," said William K. Reilly, who headed the Environmental Protection Agency under the first President George Bush.

A White House statement said the report, started under the Obama administration, was "largely based on the most extreme scenario" of global warming and that the next assessment would provide an opportunity for greater balance.

Under a 1990 law, the federal government is required to issue the climate assessment every four years. The latest version introduces new complexity in the political fight over regulations designed to fight climate change. That's because, until the administration of President Barack Obama, no such regulations existed to be fought over.

Mr. Trump has made it a centerpiece of his administration's policy to undo these rules. He has directed the Environmental Protection Agency to sharply weaken the nation's two major policies for curbing planet-warming pollution: One rule that would restrict greenhouse emissions from vehicle tailpipes, and another that would limit them from power plant smokestacks.

The rules are grounded in a 2009 legal finding, which has been upheld by federal courts, that planet-warming pollution harms human health and well-being, and therefore government policies are needed to reduce it.

In publishing the assessment, White House officials made a calculation that Mr. Trump's core base of supporters most likely would not care that its findings are so at odds with the president's statements and policies.

That view is supported by Steven J. Milloy, a member of Mr. Trump's E.P.A. transition team who runs the website junkscience.com, which is aimed at casting doubt on the established science of human-caused climate change. "We don't care," he said. "In our view, this is made-up hysteria anyway."

Mr. Milloy echoed a talking point used by other critics of the report, calling it the product of the "deep state," a term that refers to the conspiratorial notion of a secret alliance of bureaucrats and others who oppose the president.

"Trying to stop the deep state from doing this in the first place, or trying to alter the document, and then creating a whole new narrative — it's better to just have it come out and get it over with," said Mr. Milloy. "But do it on a day when nobody cares, and hope it gets swept away by the next day's news."

Work on the climate assessment, which was performed by about 300 scientists, including career government scientists at 13 federal agencies, commenced shortly after the publication of the previous report, in 2014. The project was already well underway by the time Mr. Trump took office in 2017.

The decision not to alter or suppress the report's findings — despite its scientific conclusions so much at odds with the president's policies — reflected a clear political calculus, according to three people familiar with the White House's thinking.

Since the report is mandated by Congress, not issuing it would have been a violation of the law. While some political appointees within one of the agencies that contributed scientific work to the report did suggest editing the summary of its conclusions to play down the findings, that idea was also seen as too risky politically and legally, these people said.

Instead, these people said, administration officials hoped to minimize the impact by making the assessment public on the afternoon of Black Friday, the big shopping day after the Thanksgiving holiday, thinking that Americans might be unlikely to be paying attention.

People familiar with the decision to publish said that White House officials sought to avoid the political blowback that hit the George W. Bush administration when it was revealed in 2005 that a White House official and former oil lobbyist, Philip A. Cooney, [altered the language of government climate science reports](#) to weaken the link between fossil fuel pollution and the warming of the planet.

"This moment tells you that there is a difference between the White House and the president," said Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice University. The White House has "lawyers and policy experts that don't want to go down in history as falsifying data."

In light of Friday's report, Mr. Brinkley drew a parallel between Mr. Trump's statements on climate science and President Lyndon B. Johnson's false statements to the American public a half-century ago about the Vietnam War. "Johnson used to tell people everything was going well in Vietnam, and then you'd turn on the news and see the mayhem," he said. "It was this giant disconnect."

In interviews with about a dozen authors of the climate assessment, all said that White House officials had not sought to soften or weaken its language.

"I will give credit where it's due: No one at the political level did any monkeying around with this," said Andrew Light, a co-author of the report and a senior fellow at the World Resources Institute, a Washington research organization. "For all the criticism of the Trump administration quashing climate science, this is one case where they did not do that."

Nevertheless, despite the satisfaction at seeing their scientific work made public, many of the authors expressed disappointment that Mr. Trump's strategy appears to be to ignore the findings and move forward with plans to undo climate change policies.

"It's incredibly frustrating," said Paul Chinowsky, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a co-author of the report's [chapter on the effect of climate change on roads, bridges and other infrastructure](#). That chapter concludes that more extreme storms, flooding and heat waves, along with rising sea levels, will damage the nation's roadways, leading to dangerous infrastructure collapses and up to \$21 billion in damage by the century's end.

I'm watching these arguments between politicians and scientists, but I'm on the ground with public works officials who say that argument's irrelevant," Mr. Chinowsky said. "People are going to get hurt and die if we don't change the policy."

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Coral Davenport covers energy and environmental policy, with a focus on climate change, from the Washington bureau. She joined The Times in 2013 and previously worked at Congressional Quarterly, Politico and National Journal. [@CoralMDavenport](#) [Facebook](#)