

A Leading Climate Agency May Lose Its Climate Focus



A NOAA satellite image of a storm in the Gulf of Mexico on May 26.

Credit
NOAA, via Associated Press

By John Schwartz
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The Trump administration appears to be planning to shift the mission of [one of the most important federal science agencies that works on climate change](#) — away from climate change.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is part of the Department of Commerce, operates a constellation of earth-observing satellites. Because of its work on climate science data collection and analysis, it has become [one of the most important American agencies for making sense of the warming planet](#). But that focus may shift, according to a slide presentation at a Department of Commerce meeting by Tim Gallaudet, the acting head of the agency.

In the presentation, which included descriptions of the past and present missions for the agency, the past mission listed three items, starting with “to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans and coasts.” In contrast, for the present mission, the word “climate” was gone, and the first line was replaced with “to observe, understand and predict atmospheric and ocean conditions.”

The presentation also included a new emphasis: “To protect lives and property, empower the economy, and support homeland and national security.”

NOAA’s sprawling mission includes the National Weather Service and management of the nation’s fisheries. Its use of satellites and scientific research to understand climate change has been an enormous part of its work in forecasting the cycles of phenomena such as El Niño and tracking hurricanes, as well as forecasting the coastal effects of rising seas.

While the past mission for the agency was focused on resiliency, including “healthy ecosystems, communities and economies that are resilient in the face of change,” the present mission, according to the presentation, replaced that with a focus on “a safe, secure and growing economy empowered through accurate, reliable and timely environmental information.”

The presentation by Dr. Gallaudet, an oceanographer and retired Navy rear admiral, was part of a Department of Commerce “Vision Setting Summit.” While it is common for agencies to shift priorities under a new administration, sweeping changes to the core mission of an agency are unusual.

It is unclear whether a large shift in the federal science agency’s direction could be accomplished without extensive action by Congress. The agency’s current structure and mission are defined by 127 congressional mandates, and Congress passes the agency’s budget. Changing the agency’s focus would require an extensive rule-making process — [a process that has proved](#) troublesome to the Trump administration.



Images from NOAA showed coral damage around part of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument in 2016.

Credit
Bernardo Vargas-Angel/NOAA, via Associated Press

Andrew A. Rosenberg, a former NOAA scientist and senior executive who now serves as director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists and who has seen the presentation material, issued a statement responding to the NOAA presentation that called the move “a shocking change in the mission of one of the nation’s premier scientific agencies.” The decision, he said, is “misguided and harmful to our country.”

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“Understanding the changing climate is becoming more critical by the day, as the effects of global warming mount,” he added.

Climate research already protects the economy, Mr. Rosenberg said. “NOAA is continuously working to improve forecasts of extreme events, which are intensifying in a warming world. As we know from last year’s wildfires and hurricanes, these kind of forecasts are critical for protecting American lives and infrastructure.”

When asked for comment, Dr. Gallaudet said in a statement that the presentation was “a simplified draft for discussion.”

“It was not intended to create change in NOAA mission or policy from what it was before,” he said. “Any interpretation to the contrary is simply inaccurate.”

Another NOAA scientist said that he doubted the statements would lead to broad change. “This is really not a big change in the core mission,” said the scientist, who asked that his name not be used because he was not authorized to comment. “It’s all in how you interpret the slides. Climate won’t be highlighted but it will remain a fundamental part of the NOAA mission.”

Kevin Trenberth, a climate expert at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, said that the presentation “does raise alarm bells.” In an email, he asked, “Where is climate?”

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“Instead of protecting and preserving ecosystems, it is one of exploitation,” he added. “The latter is especially offensive and shortsighted.”

The agency’s work on climate change has come under heated attack from Republican lawmakers in recent years. Representative Lamar Smith, a Republican from Texas who is chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, accused the Obama administration and federal researchers of manipulating global warming research to pursue, [as he put it during a hearing in 2015](#), the administration’s “suspect climate agenda.”

In particular, Mr. Smith launched an investigation of the agency over [a research paper that suggested that a supposed “hiatus” in the planet’s warming trend over a nearly 20-year period was the product of inaccurate data](#), and that the supposed pause in warming would all but disappear if better methodology were applied. The supposed hiatus has served as a frequent argument for those who deny the overwhelming scientific evidence for planetary warming. [The research was later validated](#), and global warming has continued: 17 of the 18 warmest years in the scientific record [have occurred since 2001](#).

Dr. Trenberth said that trying to eliminate climate from NOAA’s mission was in line with previous congressional attacks on the agency. However, he said, there’s no getting away from [the centrality of understanding climate change to the agency’s mission](#). “The fact is that improving weather and seasonal forecasts is now a climate problem: it inherently involves interactions among the atmosphere and ocean and land.”

“The omission of anything related to climate, which includes El Niño, is extremely negligent,” he said.

John Schwartz is part of the climate team. Since joining The Times in 2000, he has covered science, law, technology, the space program and more, and has written for almost every section. [@jswatz](#) [Facebook](#)

Ocean science agency chief floats removing ‘climate’ from mission statement and focusing on trade deficit

By [Chris Mooney](#) and [Jason Samenow](#)

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A recent presentation by the acting head of the United States’ top weather and oceans agency suggested removing the study of “climate” from its official mission statement, focusing the agency’s work instead on economic goals and “homeland and national security.”

Critics say this would upend the mission of the \$5.9 billion National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. But the administration disputes that interpretation, saying the presentation did not intend to create a change of direction at a vast agency that tracks hurricanes and atmospheric carbon dioxide, operates weather satellites, manages marine reserves and protects endangered ocean species, among other functions.

NOAA’s mission, the agency [says](#), is “to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.”

But in a presentation at a Commerce Department “Vision Setting Summit” this month, Rear Adm. Timothy Gallaudet, the agency’s acting administrator, suggested a change to that mission statement, as well as a new emphasis on tripling the size of the U.S. aquaculture industry within a decade and moving to “reduce the seafood trade deficit.”

The new NOAA mission, the presentation said, would be “to observe, understand and predict atmospheric and ocean conditions, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to protect lives and property, empower the economy, and support homeland and national security.”

“This presentation is a simplified draft for discussion,” said Gallaudet, an oceanographer who has spoken in the past about climate change’s effects on the Arctic, in a statement provided by the agency. “It was not intended to create change in NOAA mission or policy from what it was before. Any interpretation to the contrary is simply inaccurate.”

But the proposed removal of language about studying the “climate” and about the managing of coastal and marine resources has aroused considerable ire and concern.

“Elections have consequences,” said David Titley, a professor of meteorology at Pennsylvania State University and the former chief operating officer of NOAA. “This is just another example of where the Trump administration is frankly emphasizing short-term aspects, such as economic growth, and de-emphasizing longer-term challenges, things that will be most apparent after their term, such as impacts on climate, conservation of marine resources.”

The presentation was [first revealed](#) by the Union of Concerned Scientists, an environmental and science advocacy group.

The new mission statement outlined in the presentation still calls for studying “atmospheric and ocean conditions” — which would be influenced by climate change. And unlike other top Trump administration officials, Gallaudet — a retired Navy rear admiral with a doctorate in oceanography — has not publicly questioned the link between human activity and climate change.

Late last year, at a scientific conference in New Orleans, he [introduced](#) a presentation by NOAA scientists of their findings about the fast-changing Arctic.

Gallaudet said then that for those operating vessels in the Arctic, the environment is “the most hazardous [that] they’ve ever reported” because of changing ice conditions.

His recent presentation lists developing the best weather-prediction model in the world as a top priority but does not highlight its climate programs or initiatives.

It has prompted an outcry from some prominent scientists, including a NOAA administrator under President Barack Obama.

“This unraveling of NOAA’s core mission ignores the best interests of the American people, core Congressionally mandated responsibilities, overwhelming scientific evidence, and plain common sense,” said Jane Lubchenco, a marine scientist at Oregon State University, in a statement.

“NOAA’s core mission integrates the dual mandates of ‘observe and predict’ with ‘conserve and manage,’ ” Lubchenco added. “The two functions are highly interdependent. Eliminating multiple parts of both of them guts the whole agency and compromises its remaining functions. Eliminating basic functions of NOAA is foolhardy, ignorant, shortsighted, and very stupid. It’s akin to removing multiple vital organs from a body and expecting it to remain healthy.”

Lubchenco also said that under the new proposal, some of the agency’s congressional mandates could be “blatantly ignored or eliminated.”

“It’s a focus totally on economic development, and very little on preserving public trust resources,” said Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists and a former regional administrator at NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service, of the presentation.

“That concerns me, especially with all the progress we’ve made on fisheries.”

Rosenberg said he doubted that U.S. aquaculture could grow dramatically, given all the other current uses of and demands on the coastal real estate. As for lowering the country’s trade deficit in seafood, he said, “it’s just not going to happen.”

In 2017, [according to NOAA](#), the United States imported \$21.5 billion worth of seafood products but exported \$5.4 billion worth.

It is unclear how the Trump administration could change that. So far, if anything, the president’s trade actions may be triggering movement in the opposite direction. China has recently [proposed](#) a 25

percent tariff on one major U.S. seafood export, lobsters.

Also unclear is how any proposed reorganization or redirection of NOAA would meld with the ideas of its proposed leader — or whether that individual will even be confirmed by the Senate in time to have a say.

Gallaudet is the acting administrator and was confirmed to be NOAA's second-in-command. He is running the agency because President Trump's nominee, [AccuWeather chief executive Barry Myers](#), remains unconfirmed.

The agency has been without a Senate-confirmed head since Trump took office, even as the administration has proposed steep NOAA budget cuts that have been rejected by Congress.