



After Irma and Harvey, experts disagree on role of climate change in major storms

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On Thursday, as Texas aided those affected by Hurricane Harvey and Florida braced itself for Hurricane Irma, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt warned that now was not the right time to have a discussion about human impact on climate change.

“To have any kind of focus on the cause and effect of the storm; versus helping people, or actually facing the effect of the storm, is misplaced,” President Donald Trump’s EPA chief told CNN [in an interview](#).

Pruitt, the former Republican attorney general for the state of Oklahoma, warned that having that discussion came at the expense of a focus on storm readiness.

“What we need to focus on is access to clean water ... these issues of access to fuel ... those are things so important to citizens of Florida right now, and to discuss the cause and effect of these storms, there’s the... place to do that, it’s not now,” he maintained.

Pruitt’s unwillingness to discuss climate change after one historic storm had just devastated Texas and another was charging toward Florida was seen by critics as the latest instance of the Trump administration’s [unwillingness to affirm the realities](#) of climate change. Whereas Pruitt’s predecessors at the EPA used their position to curb human impact on the world’s changing climate, the agency under Pruitt — and by extension, Trump — [has been criticized](#) for its reversals of [sound environmental regulations](#) in favor of boons to industry.

It was enough for Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado — who, like Pruitt, is a Republican — to publicly criticize the EPA chief, for punting on a discussion about climate change and its role in Harvey and Irma.

“This is the time to talk about climate change. This is the time that the president and the EPA and whoever makes decisions needs to talk about climate change,” Regalado told the [Miami Herald](#) on Friday. “If this isn’t climate change, I don’t know what is. This is a truly, truly poster child for what is to come.”

Almost eight months into the Trump presidency, it’s hardly revelatory to remark on the seeming insurmountability of the political rifts in our electorate. But in the wake of a spate of devastating weather events both here and abroad, those looking for a front-row seat at the theater of political

warfare need not venture farther than the heated debate around climate change's impact in causing hurricanes Harvey, Irma and other extreme storms.

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Though Rafael Lemaitre, former public affairs director for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, acknowledged the reality of climate change, the former FEMA top spokesperson warned against attributing the cause of Harvey or Irma solely to climate change.

“What we do know is that climate is changing,” Lemaitre said in an interview. “And there’s no question that climate change is causing more frequent and more severe weather events. The challenge is you can’t point to any specific weather event and say: ‘This one, specifically, is due to rising temperatures over a period of time, so it’s important not to overlay it.’”

There’s evidence of what Lemaitre might call overplaying everywhere: Condemning climate change doubters, Pope Francis pointed to the recent spate of storms as proof you could see the effects of climate change “with your own eyes.”

“You can see the effects of climate change with your own eyes and scientists tell us clearly the way forward,” the leader of the Catholic Church said Monday, according to the BBC. “All of us have a responsibility. All of us. Some small, some big. A moral responsibility, to accept opinions, or make decisions.”

In the *Washington Post*, a Monday op-ed admonished the Trump administration and the vast majority of the Republican party for its unwillingness to discuss the dangers of human impact on the climate. That article’s headline characterizes the GOP’s pervasive climate change doubting as “the cruelest insult to Harvey and Irma’s victims.”

“No rational U.S. administration would look at the devastation from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and seek to deny climate change,” the piece argues. “At present, however, there is no rational U.S. administration.”

In an attempt to galvanize readers into taking action against the fossil fuel industry, a headline in the *Guardian* asks its audience to “stop talking right now about the threat of climate change. It’s here; it’s happening.”

But Pat Michaels, an ecological climatologist for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by Charles Koch, argued that all the available data do not paint a clear, compelling correlation between warming oceans and increased frequency of extreme storms.

“With climate science being as politicized as it is, we’ve received quite a lot of inquiries as to whether those rushing to blame this on human emissions are onto something, and it’s natural to wonder what’s going on when the news cycle is dominated by storms,” Michaels wrote in an article for the institute. “The truth of the matter is: We don’t yet have the data to know.”

In a phone interview with *Mic*, the climate scientist expanded on what he thinks the numbers are telling us — and, more importantly, what they aren’t.

“If everything else were equal, it would be true that a warmer Atlantic ocean would result in more intense, stronger hurricanes, given that hurricanes are supported by warm water,” Michaels said. “But in atmospheric science, particularly in climate science, when you’re talking about one

factor causing change, it's very possible that some other factors are changing too, and they have to be considered.”

To demonstrate his point, Michaels sent over a chart showing the research of Ryan Maue, a frequently cited weather scientist and colleague at the Cato Institute who recently went viral over a Twitter altercation with *Newsweek* reporter Kurt Eichenwald.

According to Michaels, the chart, which tracks the accumulated energy of global cyclones against an increasingly warmer global temperature over time, demonstrates no correlation between ocean temperature and storm intensity.

According to Michaels, these findings show no correlation between increased global temperature and an increase in storm strength or frequency.

Source: Dr. Ryan Maue

To bolster his analysis, Michaels pointed to the recent findings of the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the government body responsible for alerting the United States to extreme weather events. In late August, NOAA said that any assertion that human-caused climate change was contributing to hurricanes was “premature.”

“It is premature to conclude that human activities — and particularly greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming — have already had a detectable impact on Atlantic hurricane or global tropical cyclone activity,” Michaels said, reciting NOAA’s findings.

But those passionate to confront the realities of climate change and its possible role in creating more frequent, more intense storms may not be terribly reassured by the findings of a government agency under Trump. Leaked emails from a scientist at the United States Department of Agriculture reveal that she instructed her staff to avoid using the phrase “climate change” in reports.

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Though it is unclear whether or not a senior Trump official instructed the USDA manager to issue that guidance, such a revelation potentially complicates the scientific objectivity of government agencies under Trump for critics who admonish his administration for ignoring science and dismantling Obama-era environmental safeguards like the Clean Power Plan.

Whether or not both sides of the scientific and political schism will ever see eye-to-eye on any incident necessitating a discussion on the looming threat of climate change, Lemaitre offered a perhaps unconventional solution to the partisan quagmire: Ignore the discussion on climate change altogether.

“There will be another Harvey. There will be another Irma. We need to use these opportunities as lessons to realize we need to do things differently,” Lemaitre said. “So if the politics of climate change bother you, ignore it. But you have to deal with the reality that flooding and storms are happening more often. All you need to do is look at the science of climate. All you need to do is look at the reality of flooding happening more often.”