

Pacific Standard

Why Climate Experts Are Worried About Trump's New Panel On Climate Change And National Security

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April 23, 2019

Multiple proposed panelists have publicly expressed their skepticism of human-caused climate change.

The Trump administration has quietly begun to assemble a panel to review connections between climate change and national security.

Former United States Ambassador C. Paul Robinson may be leading the review panel, two sources who are involved in the talks told E&E News. Robinson has been a key player in policy discussions about nuclear weapons and national security, but has no previous experience discussing climate science, climate change, or climate policy. Others slated for the panel include scientists with contrarian views on climate change and people with ties to the fossil fuel industry.

The Trump administration introduced its plan for the panel earlier this year. It's a modified version of an earlier plan created by William Happer that would have established a federal advisory panel to challenge the notion that climate change threatens national security.

Here's what you need to know about President Donald Trump's newest panel.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S HISTORY WITH PANELS (AND CLIMATE SCIENCE)

"[The] Trump administration has made it a top priority to attack climate science at every turn," says Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate Law Institute at the Center for Biological Diversity. In 2017, Trump disbanded a federal climate panel tasked with evaluating the National Climate Assessment, and, in 2018, he created a wildlife protection panel mostly composed of trophy hunters and politically connected donors to hunting groups. In addition, the Trump administration has rewritten the mission statements of various government agencies, such as the Department of the Interior, and has promoted the deregulation of fossil fuels through the Environmental Protection Agency.

"There have been a lot of major concerns about censorship or risk of censorship of climate science. That's something that is fairly scary to a lot of scientists right now," says William Anderegg, assistant professor in the Department of Biology at the University of Utah, who completed a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Climate & Global Change Postdoctoral Fellowship at Princeton University.

There is a clear scientific consensus regarding climate change. A 2016 study published in the peer-reviewed journal Environmental Research Letters found that 90 to 100 percent of actively publishing climate scientists agree: Climate change is happening, and it is caused by humans.

(This affirmed a previous, widely cited study that found that number to be 97 percent, a figure that NASA also cites.)

"Broadly, the system seems to be continuing on and communicating the risks of climate change," Anderegg says. "But there are some major worrying signs, and this new proposed panel is a good example of that."

WHO WILL BE ON THE PANEL?

In the panel's selection process, people with contrarian views on climate change—many with ties to the fossil fuel industry—have been disproportionately prioritized. (The Trump administration has continuously backed individuals with strong ties to the oil industry.)

A Greenpeace investigation revealed that Happer, the physicist and National Security Council senior director who created the original plan for the panel (and was set to lead it), had previously expressed willingness to produce research on the benefits of carbon dioxide—on behalf of fossil fuel companies—at a rate of \$250 an hour.

One person currently slated for the new panel is Richard Lindzen, a retired Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who has been publicly skeptical of climate change science and has labeled belief in global warming a cult. He has also received money from Peabody Energy, the world's biggest private-sector publicly traded coal company, to publish articles casting doubt on climate science.

Another possible member is John Christy, a professor of atmospheric science at the University of Alabama–Huntsville, and new member of the EPA's Science Advisory Board. Christy has a highly scrutinized academic background and ties to various fossil fuel industry-funded conservative think tanks, including the Cato Institute and the Heartland Institute.

Some of those selected, including Judith Curry, do have a background and expertise in climate science. While Curry agrees with the 97 percent of climate scientists who believe climate change is caused by humans, her skepticism of the extent of humanity's contribution to climate change has caused controversy in the scientific community.

HOW IMPORTANT IS EXPERTISE IN CLIMATE SCIENCE SPECIFICALLY?

Very important, according to climate science experts.

"You have to look at the credibility and the expertise of the people who are being tapped, and having expertise in climate science in particular is incredibly important," Anderegg says. "We don't ask geologists to review the state of cancer biology."

Stephen Zehr, a professor of sociology at the University of Southern Indiana whose research focuses on the representation of scientific expertise in environmental controversies, agrees: A panel like this, he says, needs climate scientists specifically, but also a range of natural and social scientists, as well as environmental journalists who can effectively communicate the panel's ideas and conclusions to the public.

"Many of the [proposed panelists] don't have the kind of background on climate change science to successfully present themselves as experts, unless we're going back to the old debate about whether climate change is really occurring or not," Zehr says. "And I think we've gone well beyond that."

Panels like this need a "good balance of expertise," Zehr says, "and that balance isn't balance between individuals who believe climate change is occurring and those who doubt [the science]."

The heads of NASA and NOAA told E&E News that they have not been involved in the climate review panel thus far.

TRUMP'S CLIMATE PLAYBOOK

Both Siegel and Anderegg point to the book (and documentary) *Merchants of Doubt*, written by Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes. The book explores how a small group of scientists, supported by powerful industries such as the fossil fuel industry as well as extensive political connections, have intentionally obscured pressing issues like acid rain and global warming.

"Everything from the Trump administration playbook comes straight from the fossil fuel industry polluter playbook," Siegel says. "The fact that some of these people have a Ph.D. just doesn't change the fact that they are mouthpieces for polluters."

In spite of the Trump administration's efforts to denounce climate science, polls suggest that voters are increasingly concerned about climate change. A 2018 Politico/Morning Consult poll found that two-thirds of Americans are very or somewhat concerned about the National Climate Assessment's newest report, and that 58 percent agree with the scientific consensus that climate change is caused by human activity.

WHAT WILL THE IMPACTS OF TRUMP'S NEWEST PANEL BE?

Military analysts are increasingly concerned about the security risks of climate change. A Department of Defense official recently wrote to lawmakers that the natural disasters that are being worsened by a changing climate (such as drought, wildfires, recurrent floods, and desertification) will increasingly pose a threat to military bases around the country, according to E&E News. In recent congressional hearings, military analysts have also warned of specific climate-induced risks, such as Russia moving weapons into a thawing Arctic and increased Middle Eastern conflicts as a result of drought.

It seems unlikely that the new panel will drastically change the opinions of national security experts, who have been in agreement regarding the risks of climate change for decades.

But will it impact public opinion and policy?

According to Zehr, public opinion isn't likely to dramatically shift either. He explains that Trump's rhetoric will likely be discounted by the majority of Americans who already believe in the climate science—but, he warns, "I've been studying this issue since the early 1980s, and I've been surprised many times over the years." He also notes that the panel will likely reinforce the opinions of those who don't believe in climate change, or at least don't believe it is caused by humans.

Anderegg worries that the climate panel could influence politicians and the media, which, in turn, would affect voters and the public discourse around climate change more broadly.

Even if public opinion isn't swayed by Trump's newest panel, experts agree there are still serious risks, especially when it comes to creating substantive policy to adapt to or mitigate rapidly changing environmental conditions. "The whole purpose is to create confusion and to slow progress on climate change. We shouldn't underestimate the damage it can do," Siegel says.

"We have a fairly small and closing window to really stave off the worst of climate change," Anderegg says, "and this is basically fiddling while Rome burns."