

World Socialist Web Site

Will the Trump administration censor climate scientists?

Daniel de Vries

August 15, 2017

The *New York Times* last week published a draft scientific report warning of the dire consequences of climate change amid fears the Trump administration will suppress the findings. The report, part of a thorough review and assessment by US government climate scientists, directly contradicts assertions of the Trump administration that seek to minimize or deny the impact of man-made climate change.

The response by administration officials, if anything, validates the concern of those who provided the *Times* with the draft that the threat of censorship is real.

The published draft was part of the US government's fourth National Climate Assessment, which is mandated by Congress every four years and parallels international efforts by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It surveys and connects the various disciplines relevant to climate change, highlighting the important conclusions and gaps in understanding. It also details the consequences of climate change already observed throughout the country.

Like earlier assessments, the report states unequivocally that global climate is changing and that the warming of the past several decades is primarily due to human activities. "Thousands of studies conducted by tens of thousands of scientists around the world have documented changes in surface, atmospheric, and oceanic temperatures, melting glaciers, disappearing snow cover, shrinking sea ice, rising sea level and an increase in atmospheric water vapor," reads the draft. "Many lines of evidence demonstrate that human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse (heat trapping) gases, are primarily responsible for the recent observed climate changes."

The authoritative assessment is the product of more than 300 scientists from academia and 13 federal agencies, many of which are now headed by allies of the most heavily polluting industries and intransigent opponents of policies to reduce carbon emissions. Most notably, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Scott Pruitt has launched a campaign to undermine the scientific conclusions highlighted in the National Climate Assessments.

In response to the publication of the draft report, Pruitt kept open the option to rewrite the findings. While on tour last week to oil and gas industry chiefs, he spoke on a Texas radio show declaring the EPA will review the "accuracy" of the assessment. "Frankly this report ought to be subjected to peer-reviewed, objective-reviewed methodology and evaluation," he said, adding, apparently with a straight face, "Science should not be politicized."

Yet, EPA staff scientists have already reviewed and signed off on drafts of the 700-page report. The review process, as Rutgers University scientist and lead author Bob Krup explained to *Politico*, is a “much more extensive process than a usual peer review, which does not typically come out as a paperback book.” Erick Davidson, president of the American Geophysical Union, added that the report was “based on 50-some years of published research, and each of those papers went through its own peer review.”

The call for additional peer-review and against politicizing science by Pruitt makes no sense outside of providing phony justifications for attacking climate science. The new EPA boss has made clear that he rejects scientific consensus that attributes to human activity the cause of rising temperatures. While calling into question the National Climate Assessment, Pruitt is preparing a “red team, blue team” debate in an attempt to elevate and legitimize climate-change denial. EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman justified the exercise by remarking that climate science is constantly changing. “A new, fresh, and transparent evaluation is something everyone should support doing,” she said. The agency has also begun dismantling the few existing climate regulations, including limits to power plants, oil and gas drilling, and cars and trucks.

It is not only Pruitt’s EPA that is engaged in an offensive against climate science. The Department of Energy retweeted an op-ed by the libertarian Cato Institute that claimed Secretary Rick Perry is in the midst of a fight with climate scientists—and winning. The Department of Interior under Secretary Ryan Zinke recently reassigned dozens of staff, including Joel Clement, who went public after being involuntarily reassigned from studying the impact of sea level rise on native tribes in Alaska to accounting royalties from the oil and gas industry.

Nonetheless, the impacts of climate change continue to intensify. On the same day as the draft report was published, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) confirmed that 2016 was the warmest year on record. Temperatures will continue to increase in the long term even if carbon dioxide emissions are drastically cut. If not, the report notes, average global temperatures could rise as much as 9 degrees Fahrenheit (5 Celsius) or more by the end of this century.

The report also evaluated recent scientific developments and controversies. It debunked the idea of a hiatus, or prolonged pause in temperature increases. “The surface and tropospheric temperature records do not support the assertion that long-term (time periods of 25 years or longer) global warming has ceased or substantially slowed, a conclusion further reinforced by recently updated and improved datasets.”

This assessment also concluded that the science attributing the causes of extreme events is rapidly advancing. Droughts, heat waves, and flooding are among the most serious consequences of climate change. Examples of those tied to climate change include the European heat wave in 2003 and extreme temperatures in Australia in 2013. The report concludes that “frequency and intensity of extreme temperature events are virtually certain to increase in the future.”