



Cato closes its climate shop; Pat Michaels is out

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The Cato Institute quietly shut down a program that for years sought to raise uncertainty about climate science, leaving the libertarian think tank co-founded by Charles Koch without an office dedicated to global warming.

The move came after Pat Michaels, a climate scientist who rejects mainstream researchers' concerns about rising temperatures, left Cato earlier this year amid disagreements with officials in the organization.

"They informed me that they didn't think their vision of a think tank was in the science business, and so I said, 'OK, bye,'" Michaels said in an interview yesterday. "There had been some controversy going around the building for some time, so things got to a situation where they didn't work out."

A spokeswoman said Cato's shuttering of the Center for the Study of Science does not represent a shift in the institute's position on human-caused climate change. But the think tank moved decisively to close down the science wing that was overseen by Michaels. Ryan Maue, a meteorologist and former adjunct scholar, also left the center.

The Cato Institute insisted yesterday that Michaels' departure does not represent a shift in position. But Cato shuttered the center after Michaels' departure and did not hire a replacement for him. In addition, other researchers affiliated with Cato's climate work are no longer with the think tank.

"While it is true that, with the departure of Pat Michaels, we have deactivated our Center for the Study of Science, we continue to work on science policy issues," Kristine Brookes, the spokeswoman, wrote in an email. She didn't mention climate change.

Michaels is among a small number of academics with legitimate climate science credentials who downplay the human contribution to rising temperatures. He is a frequent guest on Fox News and other conservative outlets, and he has spent years attacking efforts to address climate change. He was influential in the administration of President George H.W. Bush, and he helped turn the GOP away from climate policy at a time when conservatives were embracing it ([*Climatewire*](#), Dec. 5, 2018). That shift has endured.

Cato also is no longer affiliated with Richard Lindzen, an emeritus professor of meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has long been critical of established climate

science. Lindzen was a distinguished fellow at the think tank. It's unclear when he left Cato, and Brookes declined to comment on personnel issues.

Maue, who worked with Michaels, said other think tanks cultivated closer relationships with the Trump White House.

"In terms of climate change and regulation, Cato was not a big player at all in the Trump administration," he said.

Michaels was not asked to take part in the White House plan for an "adversarial" review of climate science related to the National Climate Assessment. Michaels has been critical of government climate reports for decades and has published research in major scientific journals. Both of those are seen as attributes by recruiters in charge of finding experts for the White House panel.

Michaels has spent years attacking climate modeling, which he claims ran hot, despite evidence from NASA that contradicted his claims and demonstrated that models were largely accurate. He has also portrayed academic researchers in climate-related fields as beholden to funding that incentivizes them to produce alarming research. The Cato Institute has received millions of dollars from the Koch network, the Mercer Family Foundation, Exxon Mobil Corp. and other foundations that oppose regulations.

Maue said the Niskanen Center, which was founded by Cato alumnus Jerry Taylor, has attracted conservative followers with its middle-of-the-road climate policy. That's appealing to businesses that help fund think tanks and to those that might support policy positions on climate in the post-Trump era, he said.

"That's attractive to business and politicians who don't really want to see the climate flame wars continuing on," Maue said in an interview. "I think many businesses have taken an approach to what's going to happen and, assuming Trump isn't around in 2021, what's coming down the pike."

Still, Maue said that one of Michaels' lasting contributions in the climate policy debate was to create a position where one can accept that humans are affecting the climate but not as much as the vast majority of scientists claim. It's now a de facto position for many Republican lawmakers who acknowledge that humans are contributing to climate change but don't want to restrict fossil fuel use.

"Where Pat's influence is is in the term 'lukewarming,'" Maue said. "Lukewarming is not climate denial; it's just that he's taking, and most of us on this side of the issue believe in lower climate sensitivity. We don't believe there's going to be 5 degrees of warming; we figure it's at the lower end of 1.5 degrees."

The vast majority of climate scientists believe that the world could warm 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels within the next two decades and accelerate through the end of the century, with some estimates placing warming above 5 C.