



White House recruited climate critics for NOAA

September 28, 2020

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At least three prominent researchers who question the severity of climate change rebuffed the opportunity to take a senior position at NOAA.

The White House has been quietly working in recent weeks to reshape the leadership of NOAA with a goal of criticizing climate science, according to people who were contacted about the job.

The revelation that administration officials approached multiple researchers with long records of casting doubt on human-caused climate change points to a political campaign to undermine mainstream science at one of the world's leading climate agencies, experts and observers said.

After the initial candidates declined the position, the White House turned to David Legates, a geography professor at the University of Delaware who rejects the basic principles of climate science. Legates, now the deputy assistant secretary for observation and prediction at NOAA, has claimed that rising carbon dioxide levels would make the earth more hospitable to humans.

John Christy, an atmospheric science professor at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, told E&E News that a White House official promised him he would be given a free hand to change the way NOAA approaches climate research.

"The pitch was I would have new influence on the future direction of the agency," Christy said, adding that if he had accepted the job, "I would redirect money from the climate modeling project into the weather modeling project."

Christy, who downplays the severity of rising temperatures, said he was unable to take the job due to his academic commitments. His colleague Roy Spencer, a meteorologist affiliated with the Heartland Institute, also was mentioned as a possibility, but he did not pursue the opportunity.

Christy reached out to Judith Curry, the former chair of the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Georgia Tech, to see if she would be interested in the NOAA position, Curry told E&E News. She, too, rebuffed the offer.

"I'm totally uninterested in anything having to do with D.C. and government," Curry said.

In addition to Legates, the White House installed Ryan Maue, a former employee of the Cato Institute, as NOAA's chief scientist, and Erik Noble, who worked as a data analyst for the Trump campaign, as the agency's acting chief of staff.

The changes symbolize a coordinated effort to reshape NOAA's senior leadership in the dusk of President Trump's first term. Until now, the agency has remained relatively unscathed by the president's embrace of conspiracy theories about climate change.

But the moves being taken now by administration officials could outlast Trump's presidency even if he loses the November election to Democratic nominee Joe Biden, according to Andrew Rosenberg, who served as a deputy director at NOAA in the Clinton administration.

Rosenberg, who now runs the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the political appointments could be a strategic way to get climate denialists "burrowed" in at NOAA. If the political appointees are offered career positions, they will be much harder to dismiss after Trump is gone because of protections for federal workers, Rosenberg said.

"They're packing these positions, and I'm worried they're going to get burrowed in into career positions in NOAA. First of all, getting appointed in the first place is sending a very strong signal that we are not interested in the overall scientific evidence of climate change; we're going to go with the view of the fringe. That's very distressing, not only to climate change, but everything NOAA does."

Two of the new hires — Legates and Maue — have a record of downplaying climate science and have published claims in direct contradiction to NOAA peer-reviewed research.

Outside advisers to the White House have said Legates is expected to attempt to influence the next National Climate Assessment, the congressionally mandated body of research that informs policymakers around the country about how climate change is affecting their regions.

The climate 'lie'

Some NOAA employees are nervous about what the moves herald if Trump wins a second term. Climate scientists seem particularly nervous that their work will be affected. In recent months, political appointees at the Commerce Department, which includes NOAA, have been monitoring climate research more closely, according to NOAA employees.

"If your morale is not already sapped, you aren't paying attention," said one NOAA staffer who requested anonymity to avoid repercussions.

A NOAA spokesman did not respond to a request seeking comment, and the White House declined to comment on the record.

NOAA has not been entirely immune to politicization. A year ago, the agency was engulfed by a scandal when acting Administrator Neil Jacobs and senior staff criticized agency forecasters at the National Weather Service. The controversy began when Trump incorrectly tweeted that Alabama was threatened by Hurricane Dorian in September 2019.

After receiving panicked phone calls, the Birmingham office of the National Weather Service put out a statement that correctly said the storm would not hit Alabama. Jacobs nevertheless criticized the forecasters.

The episode became known as "Sharpiegate" after Trump refused to acknowledge his mistake and later pointed to a map in the Oval Office that appeared to have been altered with a Sharpie marker to show the path of the hurricane hitting Alabama.

A recently concluded investigation by the department's inspector general determined that senior NOAA officials were pressured by the White House to issue the statement that unduly criticized the Birmingham forecasters. The agency's acting chief scientist, Craig McLean, called for an investigation into the statement and supported the agency's weather forecast. McLean is now set to be replaced by Maue.

On Thursday, 85 House Democrats sent a letter to Jacobs and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross protesting the appointment of Legates, saying he would "clearly be in a position to seriously damage the agency's scientific integrity."

"While Legates promotes the fossil fuel industry's agenda and derides taxpayer dollars spent on mitigating the 'undetectable effects of climate change,' the staggering cost of failing to address climate change is terrifying to the rest of us working to save a livable future for our children and grandchildren," they wrote.

Legates will have a senior role at an agency whose scientists he deeply disagrees with. In many cases, they've proved Legates' unfounded claims wrong in peer-reviewed studies. By contrast, Legates has relished his role as a fringe researcher, collaborating with a number of groups that have received funding from the fossil fuel industry, Trump donors and foundations that oppose government regulations.

A documentary that was released last week and features Legates provides a window into the scientific priorities he might bring to NOAA.

The film, "Climate Hustle 2," is connected to the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, which has received energy industry funding. It cycles through a familiar miasma of debunked and cherry-picked scientific claims that paint the relatively small number of researchers who doubt the extent of human-caused climate change as Galileo-like figures, while climate scientists publishing peer-reviewed research are portrayed as compromised elites.

The movie is introduced by "Mini AOC," a girl dressed to resemble Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York.

"Like, I hope you learned a lot about climate change in this movie; I know I did. Like, I used to not believe in climate change either. Like, I thought it meant Mother Nature was transgendering into Father Nature," she says in the online presentation, which charged viewers \$15 to watch.

Legates features prominently in the film, which compares those who want more aggressive climate policy to the authoritarian government of George Orwell's "1984" and claims that those who question climate science face persecution and jail under organized crime statutes.

The movie claims that people who are worried about climate change want to place limits on the number of children born in America, that steaks will be made illegal and that environmentalism is a "church" that targets heretics.

It portrays climate contrarians as being up against a multibillion-dollar industry of renewable energy companies and environmental groups while ignoring its own connections to the energy industry.

The film also features Legates' co-author on a number of published studies, astrophysicist Willie Soon, who claims the sun is fueling global warming. Soon says he cried after *The New York Times* exposed that his research was secretly funded by energy companies and suggests that climate activists should be jailed. Maue's research on hurricanes is also cited in the film.

Cutting down on carbon emissions would mean that developed nations "would head toward the undeveloped world, and we would bring everybody down to the lowest common denominator," Legates says in the film. He says teaching young people about human-caused global warming is indoctrinating them into believing a "lie."

"The idea behind carbon dioxide rationing is that what it essentially says is that to survive as a planet, what we really need to do is not use any energy, and what that's going to take us back is to a condition where people have the basic necessities of life, food, clothing, shelter and security," Legates says in the movie.