

NEW YORK

Trump's Interior Department Reportedly Changed Scientific Reports to Say Climate Change Is Good

Matt Stieb

March 2, 2020

The president's habit of changing facts to fit his personal outlook appears to be trickling down within the administration: According to the New York Times, an official at the Interior Department has, in at least nine reports, edited the agency's studies and impact statements to include misleading information — including the debunked claim that rising levels of carbon dioxide driving climate change are beneficial to the planet.

The official, Indur M. Goklany, was promoted in 2017 to the office of the deputy secretary responsible for reviewing climate policies. His practice of altering reports was so well known within the agency it had its own shorthand: "Goks uncertainty language." Goklany, who is an electrical engineer and not a climate scientist, often pushed inaccurate analysis into reports, like the claims that global warming is positive for agriculture because it "may increase plant water use efficiency" and "lengthen the agricultural growing season." Neither idea reflects the scientific consensus that climate change will cause significant disruptions to agriculture in the U.S. and abroad.

"Goks uncertainty language" also attempted to question the accuracy of climate modeling, which is quite reliable, according to a recent study by scientists at the University of California, Berkeley. As the Times notes, Goklany has a long history of inaccurate climate skepticism and was only recently empowered within the agency he has worked for since the 1980s:

[Goklany] has also written papers for and participated in events hosted by libertarian think tanks including the Cato Institute and the Heartland Institute, which have spread doubt about the scientific consensus that human activity is causing the world to warm rapidly. In 2009, he appeared as an expert voice in a film titled "Policy Peril: Why Global Warming Policies Are More Dangerous Than Global Warming Itself."

But Mr. Goklany's Interior Department responsibilities expanded substantially in the early months of the Trump administration, when he was elevated by Trump appointees to a position guiding the Interior Department's climate policy and began attending senior-level meetings and weighing in on early policy moves such as changes to the

department's website ... In interviews, four current and former Interior Department officials said Mr. Goklany's rise was abrupt and unexpected.

"They were like, 'Who the hell is this guy?'" said Joel Clement, a former top climate-policy expert at the Interior Department who quit in 2017 and testified in Congress that former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke was purging the agency of government scientists working to address climate change — allegations later backed by the agency's inspector general.

Goklany's misleading language made it into reports that impacted major watersheds in the West — including the agricultural powerhouse of the Klamath, California's second-largest river by volume. According to environmental attorney Kristen Boyles, the ultimate goal of placing the information in the reports was to make it "part of the record." She told the Times that having contradictory analysis in official scientific reports will allow climate skeptics in the agency to say, "We're not going to consider climate change."

Looking at relevant events from the past year shows that the sabotage of climate science within the Trump administration is not a one-man problem: In May 2019, the president launched a climate-science panel chaired by William Happer, a physicist on the National Security Council, who once said that "the demonization of carbon dioxide is just like the demonization of the poor Jews under Hitler" and that the Earth is suffering through a "CO2 famine." In October, the Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General announced an investigation into the USDA's alleged suppression of climate science, which counters a key agency mission of providing accurate ecological data to prepare farmers. In November, the Environmental Protection Agency went a level deeper, undercutting the science that informs EPA decisions, limiting researchers' abilities to draft clean-air-and-water legislation.