

Nation of Change

Trump appoints pair of climate science deniers to NOAA while climate-fueled fires and storms rage

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The White House has made a pair of controversial appointments to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), positioning within the climate science agency two individuals who consistently misrepresent and disagree with the scientific consensus on various issues concerning climate change and who have notable ties with conservative think tanks that disseminate climate science denial.

As the Washington Post first reported this week, President Trump is naming Ryan Maue to the role of chief scientist at NOAA, a position that will help enforce its scientific integrity process. Maue is a meteorologist who has downplayed the degree and impacts of global warming, particularly ties between extreme weather events and human-caused climate change, and he has a past connection with the Cato Institute.

Maue's appointment follows the White House's appointment last week of climate science denier David Legates as NOAA's deputy assistant secretary of commerce for observation and prediction. Legates refutes the well-established scientific understanding that human activity is causing climate breakdown and he is affiliated with the Heartland Institute, which has and continues to traffic in climate denial and disinformation.

“Normally, when people are chosen for high-profile positions relating to climate change, I’ve heard of them. I have no idea who this person is, other than I’ve seen him saying things about climate that are wrong on social media and in op-eds,” said Texas A&M climate scientist Andrew Dessler in reaction to Maue's appointment. “I suspect that he has the one and only necessary qualification for the job: a willingness to advance the agenda of climate deniers.”

These appointments of climate science deniers to NOAA — the agency charged with monitoring changes in the climate system and informing Americans on this science — come at a time when there is rising concern over the Trump administration's embrace of pseudoscience and apparent attempts to interfere with or attack nonpartisan scientific and public health agencies like NOAA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A study published in April surveying federal scientists found a perceived loss of scientific integrity under the Trump administration.

The new NOAA appointments also arrive as climate-fueled disasters such as unprecedented wildfires and a litany of tropical storms and hurricanes have roiled the nation. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the backgrounds of these two individuals questioning mainstream climate science.

David Legates: NOAA's new discredited climate-denying deputy assistant

David Legates is an academic at the University of Delaware, where he obtained a Ph.D in climatology. He was formerly Delaware's state climatologist before being asked to formally step down in 2011. Four years prior, then-Delaware governor Ruth Ann Minner asked Legates to stop using the title of "State Climatologist" as his "views on climate change ... are not aligned with those of [Minner's] administration."

Legates has a long track record of casting doubt on climate science. An infamous 2007 paper he co-authored with astrophysicist Wei Hock "Willie" Soon questioned the impacts of climate change on polar bear survival. The paper, which has been roundly debunked, was partially funded by grants from major fossil fuel interests like ExxonMobil, the American Petroleum Institute, and the Charles G. Koch Foundation.

Legates has co-authored several other papers espousing climate denial with Soon, including at least three that were listed as "deliverables" for a grant from Southern Company, the coal-reliant electric utility.

He has taken numerous actions and positions that align with the interests of the fossil fuel industry. Legates was a signer of a 2017 petition urging President Trump to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. In 2018 he signed onto a friend of the court brief that was backing oil companies ahead of a climate science tutorial as part of a climate liability lawsuit. That suit was filed by the cities of Oakland and San Francisco against major petroleum producers including Exxon and Chevron.

Legates is affiliated with the notorious climate denial organization the Heartland Institute; he collaborates with other climate science-denying researchers on papers promoted by Heartland and has spoken at Heartland climate and energy conferences. Steve Milloy, another climate denier who is on the board of Heartland, applauded Legates' appointment to NOAA and told NPR: "David Legates is a true climate scientist and will bring a great deal of much-needed science to NOAA."

Given Legates' contrarian climate positions and extensive affiliation with deniers tied to fossil fuel funding, some scientists and science organizations have expressed opposition to his appointment to NOAA. The American Geophysical Union (AGU), a leading professional society for climate and earth scientists, posted a statement last week calling for the appointment to be rescinded.

“With climate change producing raging wildfires in the western United States and devastating hurricanes in the Atlantic, our nation — and the world — cannot afford to have our federal government undermining the important work of climate scientists. Legates’ appointment not only threatens our ability to combat the climate crisis and protect our planet for future generations, it undermines scientific integrity at NOAA,” the AGU said in its statement.

Gretchen Goldman, research director in the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, echoed these remarks in a [recent blog post](#). She called the Legates appointment “a slap in the face to NOAA scientists who work daily to conduct and communicate climate science to the public and decision makers.” She added that the “reckless move” was “one that can have devastating impacts on scientific integrity across the agency.”

Legates is also featured prominently in today’s online release of *Climate Hustle 2*, fellow climate denier [Marc Morano](#)’s sequel to [his 2015 film](#), which sought to “debunk myths and hype about human-caused global warming” but was [dismissed by actual climate scientists](#) as “muddled,” “misleading,” and “the usual rubbish from the usual suspects.” Morano runs the Climate Depot website for the [Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow](#) and is one of the most active pushers of climate science denialism in the country.

Ryan Maue: NOAA’s new “lukewarmist” chief scientist

Ryan Maue is a meteorologist who routinely questions the links between extreme weather events and climate change. While Maue does not dispute that human activities are contributing to climate change, he criticizes what he views as climate activists’ and Democrats’ “alarmism” on climate, and recently has attacked California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom for linking the West’s destructive wildfires to the climate crisis. Though his training is as a meteorologist and not a climate scientist, he often disputes climatologists’ findings. As the [Washington Post reported](#), Maue has “spoken out against scientists who link rapid Arctic climate change to weather extremes taking place outside the Arctic.”

He is a former adjunct scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, the think tank co-founded by [Charles Koch](#), where Maue frequently collaborated with [Patrick Michaels](#), who has said of climate change that the “[best solution is to do nothing](#).” Maue and Michaels worked together at Cato’s “Center for the Study of Science,” which “sought to raise uncertainty about climate science,” before the program was shuttered in 2019 and both men severed ties with Cato, [according to E&E News](#).

Maue likes to describe himself as a “lukewarmist” and pushes back on being labeled a “denier.” “Lukewarming is not climate denial,” Maue [told E&E News](#), adding, “Most of us on this side of the issue believe in lower climate sensitivity. We don’t believe there’s going to be 5° of warming; we figure it’s at the lower end of 1.5°.” (According to NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, the Earth’s global temperature has [already increased more than 1° Celsius](#), and the [World Meteorological Organization and the United Kingdom’s Meteorological Office recently warned](#) that there’s a 1-in-4 chance that the world hits the 1.5°C threshold within the next four years.)

Notably, Maue has criticized the White House and NOAA in the recent past, calling out the agency for “throwing your ‘Alabama’ NWS [National Weather Service] office under the bus” after President Trump erroneously warned that Hurricane Dorian would impact Alabama, an incident that has been dubbed “Sharpigate.”

After being appointed to NOAA, Maue deleted his tweets criticizing the agency and the President.

“Science denial is deadly”

These two appointments to a critical federal agency tasked with climate modeling and forecasting may not be surprising coming from a president with a history like Trump’s. He has called climate change a “hoax,” he regularly confuses climate with weather, and he recently said during a briefing on the California wildfires that “I don’t think science knows” in dismissing the role of climate change in exacerbating the fires.

As climate scientist Michael Mann pointed out on Twitter and in a statement to The Independent, this blatant disregard for science is literally costing American lives.

“But this we have come to expect from the Trump administration,” Mann said. “Science denial is deadly, whether it’s over COVID-19 or climate change.”