



## Even with Trump in Office, the Climate Denial Movement Is Quietly Falling Apart

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It might seem like the climate denial movement is getting everything it wants.

The loose network of far-right think tanks and the reclusive billionaires who fund them helped convince Donald Trump to pull the U.S. out of the Paris climate treaty. The administration is passing a wish list of policies boosting the fossil fuel industry and escalating its rollback of climate research. Trump's Environmental Protection Agency this June killed one of America's most far-reaching and effective climate laws, the Clean Power Plan, and replaced it with something much weaker.

But those who track and investigate climate deniers told VICE the movement itself appears to be in flux. Veteran deniers are being pushed out, fossil fuel funding is harder to come by and longtime policy goals are for now out of reach. They're suing each other for hundreds of thousands of dollars and attacking companies like Exxon as "alarmist" sell-outs.

Is the movement that for over two decades spread doubt and uncertainty about climate science finally receding? Or is it merely updating its approach and tactics for an era when public concern about the climate emergency is rising? Either way, experts argued, deniers are not projecting confidence or cohesion.

"They're not in great shape right now. They're cranky, they feel like they're being ignored and overlooked—they are—and they're as discredited as they've ever been," said Connor Gibson, a researcher for Greenpeace's investigation team. "The only thing is, we're currently living in the upside down... They've never had a more receptive president."

Trump earlier this year tweeted a quote from a *Fox & Friends* guest claiming that "the whole climate crisis is not only Fake News, it's Fake Science." The president also said in June that "climate change goes both ways." However, even with a vocal climate change denier in the White House, the movement is in the midst of fundamental changes.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by fossil fuel billionaire Charles Koch, this May shut down a science program that for years has questioned the consensus that humans are responsible for warming the Earth's atmosphere.

"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,'" Pat Michaels, the climate skeptic and frequent Fox News guest who

oversaw the program, told E&E News. Other well-known figures in the movement, including Richard Lindzen and Ryan Maue, have also departed the Cato Institute.

People who track the denial movement were caught off guard by the departures. "It was a bit of a shock to a lot of us," said Kert Davies, director of the Climate Investigations Center. "When that came through, we were like, 'Woah, that's different, that's new.'"

Still, he cautions against reading too much into it. He and other denier trackers don't know if the Kochs cut off funding to the program, or whether it was merely a clash of personalities. Scientists like Michaels may simply resume their work at another organization. "We're still trying to suss it out," he said.

This isn't a one-off setback for the movement, though. In July, the White House said it would shelve plans for an "adversarial" review of climate science. That frustrated Myron Ebell, a prominent denier who had led Trump's EPA transition team. He complained to E&E news that the long-held goal of forcing mainstream scientists to publicly defend their basic findings against a government-sponsored team of deniers has "been totally stymied by the forces of darkness within the administration, but also by the looming election campaign."

University of Pennsylvania atmospheric scientist Michael Mann speculated the Koch brothers and other fossil fuel companies have little interest in the blowback that could come from a "full-frontal attack on the science" hosted by the White House. "I think their decision is they don't need to do that, they're getting everything they want, why stir up a hornet's nest," said Mann, who has been a frequent target of deniers and recently won a lawsuit against a Canadian group that had accused him of fraud.

A high-profile forum on whether climate change is real could rally the hardcore denier base—which represents about 9 percent of the U.S. population—but would unlikely be well-received by the growing numbers of Americans worrying about climate change. Polling from Yale suggests that 29 percent of people are now "alarmed" about record wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and other extreme impacts of a warming planet, compared to 14 percent who felt that way back in 2013.

"That is where they truly are losing ground," Gibson said of climate deniers. "Even though politically they have way more power than they should, they are losing credibility in the culture and they know that."

They are also losing support—at least in public—from oil and gas companies. The most dramatic example of this came last year when Exxon quit a corporate lobby group known as the American Legislative Exchange Council. One of ALEC's members, the climate-denying Heartland Institute, supported a resolution asking the lobby group to go after something called "the endangerment finding." This is an EPA policy that acknowledges that carbon emissions are dangerous and creates a legal foundation for regulating them.

Exxon lobbied to kill the Heartland-backed resolution and left ALEC shortly after. This was a pretty serious reversal given that Exxon had previously been a funder of Heartland and ALEC and has given upwards of \$34 million to the denier movement overall in the past 20 years. People like Steve Milloy, a policy advisor to Heartland, were pissed. "Climate is a BS issue. Exxon knows this," he tweeted later that year. Milloy was still fuming this May when he wrote that "the oil giant has bizarrely turned climate hysteria into [a] selling point."

One reason companies like Exxon may be publicly distancing themselves from the denier movement is to avoid legal liability from a wave of litigation alleging they've deliberately stalled action on the climate emergency. "The climate lawsuits cite the funding of the denial organizations as one of Exxon's crimes," Davies said.

Support from coal companies may also be drying up. "They don't care about liability too much, they're just going out of business," Gibson said. Bankruptcy filings for Peabody Energy, Arch Coal and Alpha Natural Resources in recent years revealed that these former leaders of the U.S. coal industry were funding the denial movement. With the industry now in structural decline, however, "there's not as much of that funding available," he said.

That leaves reclusive far-right billionaires like Robert Mercer. The hedge-fund tycoon, who was a major financial backer of Trump's presidential campaign and right-wing media organizations like Breitbart, gave almost \$5 million to denier groups in 2017, including the CO2 Coalition, whose co-founder William Happer is now a Trump advisor.

"I think if you studied [Mercer's] views of what the ideal state would look like, you'd find that, basically, he wants a system where the state just gets out of the way," a former colleague of Mercer's told New Yorker reporter Jane Mayer in 2017. "Climate change poses a problem for that world view, because markets can't solve it on their own."

But there are signs even Mercer might scale back. Facing unwanted scrutiny for his conservative activism, the 72-year-old billionaire last year cut his spending on federal elections to \$2.9 million from over three times that in 2016. Denial trackers are now waiting for updated tax filings from the Mercer Family Foundation to see if his support for groups like Heartland has also declined.

"Naming and shaming these guys and their money flows does have an impact," said Brendan DeMelle, executive director of the investigative site DeSmog. "They would rather be able to operate in secrecy and not have this be on the front page of the news. Exposing this stuff increases the chances that their grandchildren look at them funny at family gatherings."

It could just be that denier funding is shifting to more secretive channels. People or companies that want to support climate denial while still having plausible deniability can donate to companies like Donors Trust, which then distribute the money anonymously. About \$125 million was funneled to denier groups this way during the Obama years. "It's difficult to know exactly what's happening behind some of these dark money curtains," DeMelle said.

Still, there's no question that traditional funding sources for groups like Heartland are becoming more difficult to come by. "That's leaving these guys in quite a bit of a bind financially," Gibson argued. "It's a limited amount of funding for all of these players in the same space and if multiple industries and if multiple billionaires are withdrawing from that space it affects all of them."

Deniers have meanwhile fought bitter legal battles among themselves over money. Matthew Hardin, the chairman of a group called the Free Market Environmental Law Clinic, sued the group's co-founder David Schnare in 2018. Civil lawsuits filed by Hardin in part alleged that Schnare mismanaged the group's finances and then tried to extort \$250,000. It was settled last year with Schnare releasing \$630,000 to a new denier group called Government Accountability and Oversight.

But embarrassing shake-ups like this don't change the fact that by some metrics the movement is more influential than ever. The watchdog group Public Citizen calculated in July that media coverage of denier groups—especially on right-wing outlets such as Fox—is higher now than five years ago. And people like the Koch brothers still have intimate access to the White House.

Davies said that the denier movement has "been declared dead so many times that I don't really believe it anymore."

At this point the best hope for marginalizing denial might be a Democrat committed to aggressive climate action being elected president in 2020, along with a wave of progressive lawmakers. "Where we stand is going to depend on the height of that wave, and how much it penetrates into Congress and even state-level legislatures," Mann said. "Because the denial machine will exploit any opportunity they have to scuttle progress."

Major progressive gains would only be the start. "Trump invited in the extremists," DeMelle said. Deniers who served on the administration's transition team or who worked with regulatory agencies like the EPA have an institutional knowledge that they can now weaponize against future administrations.

"They're going to know who to talk to on the inside. They're going to have a better understanding of what the regulatory weaknesses are that they can exploit," he said. DeMelle argued this could potentially give them "the upper hand in undermining U.S. credibility on climate action and throwing wrenches into the works."

He went on: "So even if the best Democrat wins the White House and has a bold vision it's still going to be a huge slog to undo the damage."