



Trump’s “Sharpiegate” grudge may have cost NOAA’s acting chief scientist his job

The scientist who defended forecasters against political pressure during Hurricane Dorian was told to step down for reinforcing scientific integrity.

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Umair Irfan

Remember **Sharpiegate**?

It turns out that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) may still be reeling from that episode, when President Trump’s refusal to admit he was wrong ballooned into an actual scandal at one of the nation’s premier scientific institutions.

The **New York Times** reported this week that NOAA’s acting chief scientist, **Craig McLean**, who called out political interference during the ordeal, was removed from his post this month when he asked a new political appointee to acknowledge the agency’s **scientific integrity guidelines**. The guidelines prohibit manipulating scientific research for political ends.

The appointee, Erik Noble, a former White House adviser, was not pleased, according to the Times:

The request prompted a sharp response from Dr. Noble. “Respectfully, by what authority are you sending this to me?” he wrote, according to a person who received a copy of the exchange after it was circulated within NOAA.

Mr. McLean answered that his role as acting chief scientist made him responsible for ensuring that the agency’s rules on scientific integrity were followed.

The following morning, Dr. Noble responded. “You no longer serve as the acting chief scientist for NOAA,” he informed Mr. McLean, adding that a new chief scientist had already been appointed. “Thank you for your service.”

McLean is still at NOAA, but he’s been replaced as chief scientist by **Ryan Maue**, a former research meteorologist at the Cato Institute.

It makes sense that scientific integrity was front of mind for McLean when dealing with a political appointee. NOAA in general and McLean in particular have been forced to police the line between science and politics ever since **Hurricane Dorian** in 2019 galloped toward the Gulf Coast. Trump tweeted at the time that Alabama was one of several states “most likely” to be struck. The National Weather Service’s Birmingham, Alabama, office quickly responded that the state was emphatically not in the path of the storm.

A few days later, McLean defended NOAA's scientists, including researchers at the National Weather Service, and openly decried the interference from the White House in a **statement**.

It's rare for a career employee at a government agency to publicly challenge political staff, which may be why a White House appointee at NOAA was so keen to remove him. And while the whole affair may seem silly, it has consequences beyond bruising the president's ego.

Political interference, or even the appearance thereof, undermines the credibility of an agency like NOAA whose research is used to make life-or-death decisions, like who needs to get out of the path of a dangerous storm.

Now, even before an election, just as **Hurricane Zeta**, the 27th named storm of the Atlantic hurricane season, has left 2 million without power along the Gulf Coast, political staff are sidelining scientists at an agency tasked with staying ahead of natural disasters. And it's likely more manipulation of science is in store if Trump wins a second term in office.

The Trump administration's repeated attacks on scientific agencies weaken public trust

When his words didn't match reality, President Trump tried to make reality match his words.

He responded with multiple tweets defending his statement that Alabama was in the path of Hurricane Dorian. He pressured his **Homeland Security adviser** to release a statement validating him. NOAA, the parent agency of the National Weather Service, issued a **curt statement** downplaying comments from its Birmingham station. Then, in the Oval Office, President Trump infamously presented a map of Hurricane Dorian's path, but the forecast was doctored with a black line to include Alabama.

Altering an official weather forecast is **actually illegal** for a government employee, though it's not clear who actually drew the black line on the map (it's not clear whether it was drawn with a Sharpie, either).

In a September 10, 2019, **statement**, McLean criticized the decision to use NOAA's press office to echo Trump and undercut the National Weather Service. "My understanding is that this intervention to contradict the forecaster was not based on science but on external factors including reputation and appearance, or simply put, political," he wrote. "If the public cannot trust our information, or we debase our forecaster's warnings and products, that specific danger arises."

The **inspector general of the US Department of Commerce**, which oversees NOAA, agreed. A report from the inspector general this summer found that NOAA's credibility "took a serious hit" when top officials at the agency contradicted the National Weather Service's Birmingham office:

The Statement undercut the NWS's forecasts and potentially undercut public trust in NOAA's and the NWS's science and the apolitical nature of that science. By requiring NOAA to issue an unattributed statement related to a then-5-day-old tweet, while an active hurricane continued to exist off the east coast of the United States, the Department displayed poor judgment in exercising its authority over NOAA.

But the political pressure on NOAA was mounting before Sharpiegate and has been aimed at influencing the science that drives policy, particularly around climate change.

Since Trump took office, NOAA has not had a Senate-confirmed leader. Currently, **Neil Jacobs**, the acting Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, is serving as NOAA's interim administrator. Meanwhile, Trump has repeatedly made his disdain for climate change science clear. Shortly after taking office, federal agencies began removing references to **climate change from their websites**.

For the most part, scientists at NOAA continued doing their jobs but have collided with the White House at times. NOAA is one of the contributing agencies to the **National Climate Assessment**, a report mandated by Congress to assess the impacts of climate change on the United States. After the last installment highlighted the economic costs of climate change, **Trump said he didn't believe the findings** — likely because they undermined his administration's policies to boost fossil fuels and relax greenhouse gas restrictions.

Since the report is foundational to how the government plans for the future, the Trump administration is aiming to alter it during a second term by “removing longtime authors of the climate assessment and adding new ones who challenge the degree to which warming is occurring, the extent to which it is caused by human activities and the danger it poses to human health, national security and the economy,” according to the **New York Times**.

The Trump administration has already pursued a similar tack at the **Environmental Protection Agency**. The EPA ousted numerous **independent scientific advisers** and instead brought in researchers from the industries it's supposed to regulate. The agency also placed additional restrictions on what kinds of research could be used to develop environmental regulations, making it easier to roll back restrictions and harder to come up with new rules to govern hazards to air, water, and soil.

And now we're also seeing this manipulation play out in the Covid-19 pandemic. The White House has repeatedly interfered with and undermined guidance from public health agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Because Trump talked them up, the FDA granted emergency use authorizations to therapies like **hydroxychloroquine** and **convalescent plasma** despite weak evidence for their effectiveness.

The net result of all this manipulation is a loss of public trust, making it less likely that people will adhere to guidelines to protect them from disease or environmental dangers. And with the science itself being twisted to meet political ends, dirtier air and water due to weaker regulations, communities left more vulnerable in a disaster, as well as unready and risky approaches being deployed to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic may result.