



## The battle over science in the Trump administration

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President Donald Trump has made no secret of his desire to roll back environmental regulations and change the playing field for the fossil-fuel industry.

His administration's actions over its first six months have followed that lead, including what many scientists say is a full-fledged battle against research and facts.

Last week the [twitter account](#) for the Department of Energy tweeted out an op-ed written by a scholar at the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank, with the headline: "In the fight between Rick Perry and climate scientists -- He's winning"

At the Interior Department, a climate scientist who has shared his thoughts on global warming was recently reassigned -- to accountant. At the Agriculture Department, the man Trump has chosen to [head science](#) as undersecretary of agriculture for research, education and economics has no formal hard sciences background. At the Environmental Protection Agency, where the administration has successfully delayed a number of [regulations](#) drafted under President Barack Obama, Administrator Scott Pruitt is [aiming](#) to get more industry voices into the scientific process.

Pruitt is also currently discussing how to go about putting together a "red team, blue team" effort to bring in outside experts to challenge climate science, including the scientific consensus that man-made greenhouse gas emissions are a driver of global warming and its associated effects, in a back-and-forth critique with EPA experts.

The endgame, critics say, is a whittling down of scientific credibility that can help loosen environmental regulations.

"When you get down there to EPA, you realize there is constant questioning of everything scientific of EPA that may have any implication down the line to have an impact on the regulated community," said Thomas Burke, former deputy assistant administrator of EPA's Office of Research and Development under Barack Obama.

Positions under fire

Joel Clement was director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Interior Department, until three weeks ago. Now he's a senior adviser at the department's Office of Natural Resources Revenue -- a position he labels an accounting job.

"I was reassigned to an accounting office in the department that collects the royalty checks from the oil and gas and the fossil fuel interests," Clement told CNN. He formerly studied the impact of rising sea levels on Native American tribes in Alaska.

Clement was one of 50 at Interior who received letters in early June that they would be involuntarily reassigned to other positions. The letter he received cited a need to "improve talent development, mission delivery and collaboration."

Clement filed a complaint last month with the US Office of Special Counsel, citing retaliation claims from the Trump administration.

"I think the topic of science comes up all the time, and oddly it's questioned more often than it ought to be. But without the scientific experts and the policy experts that work on this issue, we're actually putting American lives at risk," Clement told CNN.

Eight Senate Democrats wrote a letter to Interior's inspector general to investigate the reassignments on the grounds that it could be an "abuse of authority."

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke told Congress in June that reassignments will be part of the process meant to reduce the department's "physical footprint."

So far the Trump administration has eliminated hundreds of positions through proposed budget cuts. EPA employees are facing buyouts and threats of layoffs. And there are multiple stories of additional micromanagement, including a Washington Post report of an Interior order last month to remove two climate change experts from participating in a tour of Glacier National Park on the day that Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg was slated to visit.

Pruitt, who formerly filed numerous lawsuits against federal regulations during his time as Oklahoma attorney general, has made no secret of his desire to give more weight to regulated industries.

"What the American people deserve, I think, is a true, legitimate, peer-reviewed, objective, transparent discussion about CO2," Pruitt told the Washington Post in June.

"The citizens just don't trust that EPA is honest with these numbers," Pruitt told The Wall Street Journal in February. "Let's get real, objective data, not just do modeling. Let's vigorously publish and peer-review science. Let's do honest cost-benefit work. We need to restore the trust."

Part of expanding that trust is bringing the voices of the fossil fuel industries into the mix.

"We believe in dialogue with, and being responsive to, all our stakeholders," said EPA spokesperson Liz Bowman. "The difference between us and the previous administration is that we feel that the regulated community is an important stakeholder. Input from the technical and scientific experts on the ground is valuable to the regulatory process."

Regarding the "red team, blue team" concept, Bowman said, "Climate science, like other fields of science, is constantly changing. A new, fresh, and transparent evaluation is something everyone should support doing."

Pruitt has also dismissed half of the scientists serving on a scientific review board that provides guidance to the EPA.

At the Energy Department, a not-yet-released report on whether the US electric grid is ready for renewable energy is being led by a man who formerly worked for a think tank funded by the fossil-fuel industry.

In addition, an op-ed tweeted by the Energy Department last week argued that major scientific institutions have become biased and politicized on the climate issue. The piece was written by a scholar at conservative think tank the Cato Institute and specifically focused on criticizing the American Meteorological Society, a non-profit professional organization for scientists and researchers.

The administration's handling of agency science advisory boards is also changing. In May, Interior froze the work of more than 200 advisory boards, committees and subcommittees -- about a third of those advisory boards are science-based.

Critics warn that the administration's moves impose a clear conflict of interest.

"It's bastardizing the definition of scientific integrity," said Terry Yosie, former director of the EPA science advisory board under President Ronald Reagan. "The peoples whose interest are affected already have a place in this process. There's a public comment period. The scientific advisory process is meant to judge the weight of the scientific evidence, not how other places like specific coal plants will be affected."

Environmentalists point to the administration's move to delay or roll back federal regulations.

The Trump administration throughout multiple agencies has attempted to delay a number of regulations slated to take effect this year -- 47 total according to a list of Federal Register filings compiled by a professor and law student at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. EPA leads the group, delaying and or reviewing at least 14 rules.

However, guiding rules within the EPA mandate that a regulation cannot simply be overturned, it has to be replaced by another rule and the rule itself has to be based in science.

This is especially true when looking at the Clean Air Act. In 2007, the Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. EPA* that greenhouse gases are air pollutants that would be covered by the act and so EPA must protect the public from pollution. Following that decision, the EPA, as required by the court, released endangerment findings that found greenhouse gas emissions endanger public health. This document is the basis for a lot of the regulations finalized under the Obama administration.

Environmentalists believe that the EPA under Pruitt looks like it wants to reverse this endangerment finding and say that greenhouse gases don't contribute to climate change --

basically reversing the science -- by using the red team blue team effort, according to a source at the Union of Concerned Scientists who asked to remain anonymous because he was not authorized to speak.

Administration members are soliciting less feedback from scientists who work within the government agencies, critics say.

"It's kind of like the movie 'The Breakfast Club,'" said Burke. "The kids, the little brat pack, they are fessing their situations in life. ... Molly Ringwald's character says of her parents, 'They ignore me.' That's what's happening to the career staff. They are being ignored."

Clement likens the scene within the Interior Department to a chilling effect.

"There's no question there's a chill on the science enterprise within the federal government," he said. "I think there's a sense of neglect. If there's something that needs to be attended to in advance, that has not happened. And there have been many cases where the science has actually been suppressed. So at this point, the question becomes not, 'Are they trying to have an impact on science?' but, 'Are they doing anything illegal or inappropriate to stifle that science?'"