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Pruitt climate science challenge splits conservative allies

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EPA chief Scott Pruitt's attacks on mainstream climate science are causing discomfort in a surprising corner — among many of the conservative and industry groups that have cheered his efforts to dismantle Barack Obama's environmental regulations.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, political groups backed by the Koch brothers and the top lobbying organizations for the coal, oil, natural gas and power industries are among those so far declining to back Pruitt's efforts to undermine the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change, according to more than a dozen interviews by POLITICO. Some advocates privately worry that the debate would politically harm moderate Republicans, while wasting time and effort that's better spent on the Environmental Protection Agency's regulatory rollback.

Nevertheless, the former Oklahoma attorney general is persisting — a stance that could enhance his future political prospects in his deep-red home state.

As with immigration, trade and health care, climate change is one of numerous issues on which President Donald Trump's administration must decide how aggressively to attack the established consensus. And some of Pruitt's allies worry about the dangers of going too far.

"Policy risks could arise from playing politics," said Chrissy Harbin, vice president of external affairs for Americans for Prosperity, a major conservative group backed by the industrialist brothers Charles and David Koch. "If done incorrectly, efforts that are more politically motivated than policy-focused could unintentionally undermine conservatives' ability to roll back overreaching Obama-era regulations."

Pruitt drew widespread criticism in late June after EPA revealed that he was pushing for government-chosen experts to hold a public "red team, blue team" debate about climate science — a move that environmentalists say would place fringe views on an even playing field with established, peer-reviewed research.

He also hasn't ruled out trying to overturn EPA's science-based conclusion that climate change threatens human health and welfare, a 2009 decision that legally requires the agency to take action to limit greenhouse gas emissions.

Pruitt is also weighing a crucial policy decision in which science could play a major role — whether EPA should craft a replacement for Obama's landmark 2015 greenhouse gas regulations for power plants, which Pruitt and Trump have vowed to repeal. Most power companies want the agency to replace Obama's climate standards with a far laxer regulation that would require few changes for coal plants, but doing that would mean acknowledging EPA's legal authority on climate change.

A riskier alternative would be for EPA to revoke its 2009 scientific conclusions in hopes of forgoing climate regulations altogether.

Pruitt's decision could be influenced by people like West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, who is challenging Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) in 2018 and was involved in lawsuits against Obama's regulations. Morrisey recently pitched options to "permanently kill the Obama Power Plan" to his state's coal lobby, and he plans to talk to through those possibilities with other Republican attorneys general soon.

Pruitt has publicly scoffed at the idea that carbon dioxide is a "primary contributor" to global warming — not too unlike Trump himself, who has dismissed human-caused climate change as a "hoax."

But not all Republicans support reopening that debate. And the top fossil-fuel trade groups have not asked the agency to reexamine its 2009 conclusion about climate science, commonly known as the "endangerment finding."

"We have neither taken a position on it nor have we been terribly interested in that debate," said Luke Popovich, a spokesman for the National Mining Association, which has preferred to attack Obama-era regulations as government overreach and threats to jobs and the economy. "We're not debating the 'accept or deny climate science.' We approach it as a policy issue: how do we deal with this issue, what is the most prudent and rational course for that … we have much more pressing issues, as you can imagine."

AFP and the Chamber also have not asked Pruitt to dispute climate science or the legal finding, and neither have the Koch-backed American Legislative Exchange Council, the American Petroleum Institute, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, the Edison Electric Institute or the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, a major political donor whose members include coal-burning power utilities in rural states. Most of those groups haven't taken a public stance, but others have privately argued against the effort.

On the other hand, some conservative groups do want Pruitt to contest the endangerment finding — among them, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Energy Alliance, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Heartland Institute. Bob Murray, CEO of the coal company Murray Energy CEO, has also argued that his industry needs Pruitt to rescind the finding, although other coal producers have disagreed with him. Other coal companies are still discussing their positions.

Steve Milloy, a well-known climate change critic who is a fellow for the conservative E&E Legal Institute, maintained that "all of the climate skeptics are in favor of this whole thing." But he added that he thinks the idea for challenging climate science "all came from Scott Pruitt himself."

“Industry guys are all over the map,” Milloy said. “They're all very confused and don't know what's good for them."

Disputing the endangerment finding would be tough, triggering a legal fight from environmental groups that EPA could easily lose given the vast amount of evidence from scientists that shows man-made greenhouse gas emissions harm the environment. And it could last through the end of the Trump administration.

“The downsides are considerable,” said David Bookbinder, chief counsel for the libertarian Niskanen Center, which believes Pruitt has a legal duty to regulate greenhouse gases. “It would take an enormous amount of work to do it, and then [Pruitt] would get laughed out of court.”

Bookbinder argues Pruitt’s climate debate is a “a political exercise entirely.”

“This is nothing more than to give people a show,” Bookbinder said. “The man’s running for Senate next year. Everything he says is calculated toward securing the Republican nomination in Oklahoma and then winning the general election there.”

Pruitt has not disclosed any plans for a Senate run, although Sen. Jim Inhofe’s term is up in 2020. Democrats and watchdog groups have similarly accused Pruitt of using his EPA post and the climate debate to launch a campaign for Congress. Pruitt has helped fuel those accusations by making frequent trips home — based on a review of travel records, Reuters reported that Pruitt spent almost half his days in Oklahoma this past spring.

Pruitt recently told The Oklahoman that he was not interested in jumping into the state’s open gubernatorial race next year. But he declined to speculate on a possible run for Senate if Inhofe retires before Election Day in 2020, at which point Inhofe would be 85.

EPA did not comment for this story.

Climate change typically doesn’t drive voters to the polls. Still, Oklahomans are more skeptical of the science than most Americans, according to the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. Inhofe has repeatedly won reelection as one of the chamber’s most vocal critics of climate science, including writing a book on the topic called “The Greatest Hoax.”

Republicans who accept that humans cause climate change but have questions about the best policy response say Pruitt’s enterprise could be helpful but risks becoming overly politicized.

Eli Lehrer, president of the R Street Institute, a free-market think tank that has argued for a congressionally mandated carbon price, said a debate “could be very helpful in clarifying what conservatives should be doing and how conservatives should and should not worry about it.”

“If Republicans, on the other hand, end up going down the rabbit hole of saying that an overwhelming scientific consensus is a hoax or a fraud, then it becomes a problem,” he added.

GOP politicians in swing districts would be forced to defend or denounce the administration, he said.

But that’s inevitable, some of the people pushing for a review of the science say.

“The whole, ‘I’m not a scientist’ thing went over like a lead balloon,’” said one conservative familiar with polling on the issue — alluding to one recent GOP talking point on climate change.

“You’re not a doctor either, but you vote on health care. [Addressing] the science in unavoidable.”

In addition to potentially stressing moderate Republicans, Pruitt’s plans put industry in a tough spot.

Power companies in particular are against debating the science or reviewing the endangerment finding, but they don’t want to fight Pruitt publicly.

“In the utility world, I couldn’t name anyone who is advocating for that right now,” said one power-sector source who spoke anonymously because he didn’t want to draw attention to his company.

Some want the finding intact because they are continuing to lower their carbon emissions by shutting down coal plants and building more natural gas-fired and renewable electricity. They assume they will face carbon limits in the future, regardless of the Trump administration’s plans. Others don’t think the fight is worth the time and money, the source said.

The source added that most aren’t making their position known because it’s “not worth the risk of being out in front of something like this like this,” including because they might come under pressure from shareholders for any public comments.