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There's a climate crisis – but Trump's cabinet continues to backtrack on science

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Conservative donors and fossil fuel companies have the most to lose from large-scale decarbonization – and they know it

In an effort to suppress federal climate research, the Trump administration will direct state agencies to no longer consider worst-case scenarios of global warming. Climate modelers working for federal agencies will only be permitted to forecast to 2040, decades before the as-much-as 8C degrees of global warming that could take place by 2100 if we continue on our current path.

William Happer – most recently famous for complaining that the “demonization” of carbon dioxide “really differs little from the Nazi persecution of the Jews” – will lead a team charged with reviewing the science produced by government researchers, no doubt hunting for references to the disastrous sea-level rise, crop failures and health impacts continued warming stands to create.

The irony in all of this is that Trump, Happer and company may have a firmer grasp on the epic scope of these climate projections than many Democrats. As Naomi Klein argues, even the right’s fervent conspiracy theorists tend to understand at some level how profound the implications of this crisis are for business as usual, which has distributed its profits among elites of both parties.

“Members of Trump’s cabinet,” Klein has written, “with their desperate need to deny the reality of global warming, or belittle its implications”, nonetheless “understand something that is fundamentally true. To avert climate chaos, we need to challenge the free-market fundamentalism that has conquered the world since the 1980s.”

For all their bluster and junk science, Republican decision-makers have a clear sense for their own self-interest – and just how much is at stake for them and the rest of the 1%. Consider Happer himself, a retired physicist who has spent his post-academy days hopping between various climate-denying thinktanks, a good many of them funded by the fossil fuel industry.

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In 2015, Greenpeace activists duped Happer into agreeing to write a report on the benefits of carbon dioxide for a fictional oil company. The (real) coal company Peabody Energy has paid him to deliver testimony at a state hearing in Minnesota, and Happer has joined hands with

groups like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute – all recipients of ample industry funding – to bolster Trump’s agenda and cast doubt on the scientific consensus.

As the New York Times reported in its article on the White House’s new climate plans, both Happer and John Bolton – who tapped him for the administration – have received generous support from the Mercers, the rightwing family credited with both spreading climate denial and helping fuel the opioid epidemic.

We can’t know whether Happer genuinely believes the nonsense he’s spouting, or is just being paid well enough to sound like he does. The answer doesn’t really matter. Any clear-eyed assessment of what the science is telling us spells out who the winners and losers of rapid decarbonization would be. To cap warming at around 2C – a threshold many already dealing with climate impacts argue is too high – about three-quarters of known fossil fuel reserves will need to be kept underground, a reality that if realized as public policy would crater the stock price of energy companies.

Climate scientist Kevin Anderson has estimated that if the top 10% of greenhouse gas emitters were to live like the average European – an improvement even for many of us in the United States – global emissions could decline by a third. It is “possible with the laws of chemistry and physics”, according to IPCC scientists, to limit warming to the boldly ambitious target of 1.5C. The problem is our politics, and how much of a stranglehold the fossil fuel executives with the most to lose from decarbonization have over them.

Establishment Democrats, meanwhile, are asleep at the wheel. The pitch for taking on the climate challenge is a compelling one for reasons well beyond the fact that it could prevent runaway catastrophe. The Green New Deal promises a well-paid job for everyone who wants one, a real mass transit system, clean and affordable energy and universal healthcare – a necessity as people leave their jobs to find new work in the transition away from fossil fuels.

While several Democratic primary contenders have embraced the Green New Deal and begun proposing their own plans, the frontrunner in that race, Joe Biden, and the Democrats’ congressional leadership have been cooler toward it, offering neither a decarbonization plan nor a compelling reason for voters to get behind them come 2020. That’s a dead end for the planet, but also for the party’s political prospects.

With Donald Trump at their helm, Republicans will keep denying climate change because it represents a dire threat to their fossil fuel donors’ bottom lines. Democratic leadership would do well to follow the lead of their party’s insurgent progressive wing, and take the climate threat as seriously.