

NOAA taps new chief scientist who downplays climate change

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September 22, 2020

On Monday, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration moved to replace its acting chief scientist with a full-time hire. Ryan Maue, a hurricane researcher who has worked for a number of private weather companies, is taking over the position being vacated by Craig McLean.

While nowhere close to the outlier of David Legates — the recently hired deputy assistant secretary for observation and prediction who has said rising carbon dioxide is good because it will make crabs bigger (seriously) — Maue has somewhat lukewarm views on climate change. He'll be stepping into a role that McLean used to investigate the disaster that was Sharpiegate, putting someone with no government experience in a high pressure position to stand up for science against political power.

Earther confirmed Maue's appointment with two sources with knowledge. It was first reported by the Washington Post. Maue declined to comment for this story while NOAA and the Department of Commerce it sits under did not respond to request for comment.

Maue has, among other things, contributed to Watts Up With That, a climate-denial blog run by meteorologist Anthony Watts, and is frequently cited by other denier outlets, including just last week for a since-deleted tweet saying Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden was "shameless" for connecting the West's wildfires to climate change (they are), "but it's their political strategy to blame Trump for all natural disasters past, present, and future" (Biden didn't; he warned of the risk of four more years of Trump's deregulatory policies).

While Maue doesn't deny the influence of greenhouse gases on the planet, he has suggested that the impacts of climate change are more moderate than the vast majority of scientists. In a 2018 op-ed for the Wall Street Journal, Maue — then working as an adjunct associate at the libertarian Cato Institute — and another a Cato researcher argued that former NASA climate scientist James Hansen's 1988 testimony, which was instrumental in raising a major warning flag on climate change, was mostly bunk.

"On the 30th anniversary of Mr. Hansen's galvanizing testimony, it's time to acknowledge that the rapid warming he predicted isn't happening," they wrote. "Climate researchers and policy makers should adopt the more modest forecasts that are consistent with observed temperatures. That would be a lukewarm policy, consistent with a lukewarming planet."

Hansen's projections, however, *have* been borne out, including under the scrutiny of peer review. The impacts of climate change as it intersects with other policies were clear in 2018 and have become clearer still today. Hotter, drier weather intersecting with decades of forest mismanagement have led to a firestorm in California. Then there are just the straight-up climate-

driven catastrophes from the Arctic burning at rates unprecedented in 10,000 years to coral bleaching.

“It’s climate denial at its finest,” Andrew Dessler, an atmospheric scientist at Texas A&M, said in an email about the op-ed. He added that he was surprised by Maue’s hire due to his apparent “willingness to advance the agenda of climate deniers.”

A source at NOAA who requested anonymity to speak freely similarly pointed to the op-ed and noted that “he seems like another hire to poison NOAA with climate denial.”

Now, Maue will be the head scientist pending security and ethics review at one of the leading climate research agencies in the U.S. He’ll set the agenda for not just climate but weather, water, risk communication, satellites, modelling, and more areas under NOAA’s purview. Maue’s knowledge of hurricanes as well as an investment in issuing clear public warnings about weather risks are assets. But his climate record as well as limited public academic record raised red flags for Andrew Rosenberg, a former NOAA regional administrator and the director for the Centre for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, a science watchdog group.

“I often say to people, all scientists are climate scientists now,” he said. “It’s not just people modelling atmosphere and ocean. It’s those people looking at systems impacted by climate change, which is all systems. This will affect everybody and work they do.”

According to UCS surveys of federal scientists have said they felt a chilling effect on their work due to political influence, though NOAA has so far largely been immune. With Maue and the even more out there Legates in the administrator’s office, it could be hard for climate science to get a fair shake or for the administrator and those above him to receive impartial information.

NOAA has been a relative backwater for much of the Trump administration. Barry Myers, Trump’s choice to lead the agency, saw his nomination stall out in the Senate over concerns he would privatize large swaths of NOAA. Since President Donald Trump took office, the agency has gone through a series of acting directors and an acting chief scientist, a role that doesn’t require Senate confirmation.

But the agency can under a halogen light in 2019 thanks to Trump’s hand-drawn forecast for Hurricane Dorian after he made a bad tweet claiming the storm would hit Alabama when it posed no threat to the state. The resulting catastrophe — with a local National Weather Service office subtweeting the president, then the map, then a NOAA statement in support of the president and throwing forecasters under the bus — became known as Sharpiegate. At the time, reports indicated Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross wanted to fire NOAA leadership and put pressure on staff to walk the party line. All, mind you, in the middle of a catastrophic storm that ripped the Bahamas apart and clipped the East Coast.

In the wake of the storm, McLean conducted a review and found officials violated scientific integrity rules, but no punishments were handed out. Now that position will be filled by someone who has voiced support for Trump. Maue has said it’s fair to criticise Trump for spouting lies, though he called Trump’s science communication style “a mess” rather than the stream of misinformation that it is.

On the day of the Sharpiegate map mess, Maue tweeted that he would’ve advised the president of possible impacts of Dorian on Alabama, though the timeline for when he would’ve issued his

advice that didn't line up with Trump's errant tweet and double-down by making a fake map. Yet he also tweeted that NOAA threw the local NWS office under the bus for contradicting the president.

Obviously, the best thing would be to not end up in a place like Sharpiegate in the first place. But what it means for an agency already under scrutiny to have a new chief scientist who is sympathetic to Trump remains to be seen.

"There's a team of people who help steer the agency," Rosenberg said. "It's not that they do all the work, but they are good leaders. Chief scientist is part of that team. I am nervous about Maue, but that doesn't mean it's impossible for him to do a good job."