

ClimateWire

Contenders for Pruitt's 'red team' say it would be 'a hoot'

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U.S. EPA chief Scott Pruitt and his colleagues won't have any trouble finding scientists keen on poking holes in mainstream views about climate change.

Pruitt and other members of the Trump administration have proposed launching a so-called red-team effort to give scientists in the minority the chance to take shots at the prevailing views about how much human activity contributes to climate change.

How that effort shapes up remains to be seen. Pruitt has suggested televised sparring between the two sides, and he's reportedly looking to hire a former Obama administration official to lead the effort.

Scientists who feel they've been marginalized for years have plenty of ideas for the new administration, and some — feeling newly empowered under the Trump administration — are eager to join the red team.

"I'd be interested," said John Christy, a climate scientist at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

Christy has been pushing for a red-team review of climate science for years. He pointed to his testimony before Congress in 2012, when he said taxpayer funds should be used for "well-credentialed scientists to produce an assessment that expresses legitimate, alternative hypotheses that have been (in their view) marginalized, misrepresented or ignored" in previous government-funded climate reports.

Count Judith Curry as another who would join the effort. She's a climatologist and former professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

"If the powers that be want me involved, I would be happy to help," Curry said last week in an interview. She has been a vocal supporter of the red-team concept.

Pruitt is considering hiring former Obama administration energy official Steven Koonin to oversee the effort, according to Myron Ebell, who led the EPA transition team for the Trump administration (*Greenwire*, July 24).

Koonin's April op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* calling for climate red teams made waves in the climate world and got the attention of Pruitt, who discussed the article with Koonin in his office that month. Pruitt told Reuters that he "took the opportunity" to talk about the article during an unrelated meeting. He called Koonin's piece "exciting."

Koonin declined to comment on whether he's in talks with Pruitt about leading such an effort, but some see him as a logical candidate.

"He would be, I think, the ideal person to coordinate this and put the thing together," said Curry. "I would feel very comfortable about this whole thing if he had some role."

"He's a straight shooter, and he's got the credibility because of his position in the Obama administration," she said. "He seems like a reasonably objective person to people on both sides."

The Trump administration has reached out to the Heartland Institute, a conservative think tank, for ideas about the initiative, said H. Sterling Burnett, a Heartland research fellow on environmental policy.

Burnett suggested some potential candidates for the red team, a roster he called "climate realists." They include Christy; William Happer, a Princeton University physics professor and a rumored contender to be Trump's science adviser; David Legates of the University of Delaware; and Patrick Michaels, director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.

Christy offered several names, including his colleague at the University of Alabama, Roy Spencer; Richard Lindzen from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Roger Pielke Sr., a senior research scientist at the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences in Colorado.

While picking members of the red team might be easy, the administration might have a tougher time finding participants for the so-called blue team.

Many climate scientists have complained that the exercise presents a trap for those who see the science as settled. Participating would lend the minority of researchers who question mainstream climate science a high-profile platform; refusing to take part would allow critics to say the climate scientists are hiding something (*Climatewire*, July 13).

So how will this work?

Proponents of the red-team approach have plenty of ideas about how it could happen.

Pruitt's suggestion that the debates could be televised garnered a lot of attention, but many climate researchers on both sides have slammed that as a bad idea. They say TV would require complex concepts to be too distilled.

A televised debate "would be a fiasco," Curry said.

Instead, some want to see a series of reports, congressional hearings, or even a website where theories are posted and outsiders can take aim when they see problems.

Curry suggested a series of reports followed by congressional hearings. Those could look at a range of topics like the social cost of carbon or impact issues like sea-level rise or extreme weather.

"You can imagine any number of topics that would be relevant, but the policymakers have to pick which ones they care about," she said.

Ebell, who is at the conservative Competitive Enterprise Institute, pointed to the "Team B" effort in the 1970s under then-CIA Director George H.W. Bush to assess the Soviet Union's capabilities.

"They took the same intel that the CIA was using, and they gave a different analysis of it," Ebell said. "That's one way to do it."

Ebell said if the effort is housed at EPA, it would likely be in the agency's Office of Research and Development. Other offices could also take the lead, like NOAA or the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, he said.

Christy suggested that topics like the physical science of climate, the benefits of increased carbon dioxide or the value of affordable energy to poor people could be up for discussion.

"In this day and age, I would guess you'd do it with reports, probably electronically," Christy said. He suggested a website in which the red team presents its case for the evidence and outsiders take their best shot at its findings.

"It would be a hoot and pretty complicated to manage," he said.

David Gelernter, a professor of computer science at Yale University who has also been rumored as a possible nominee to lead the White House science office, said he's "hoped for years that we could organize a head-to-head presentation of arguments by some strong man-made climate change people and strong anti-[man-made climate change] thinkers."

He said the effort would be like "a war game" in a sense.

He pitched having policymakers and the public and press hear presentations, "say, an hour from each side," with another hour or so to ask questions. "This brief session wouldn't settle anything but would make it absolutely clear to everyone, I think, that we need more such sessions — we need a month of them, or half a year of them," he said.

Gelernter sees the dialogue as urgent.

"We need to have this debate now, this afternoon. It's got to happen, and it will, in some form — I hope in a form that builds clarity and not just rancor," he said.

EPA spokeswoman Liz Bowman didn't respond to a request for comment about how the effort is shaping up. She told E&E News earlier this month: "I understand everyone is very interested in the Red Team/Blue Team, but please stay tuned for more information."

