

A Leading Climate Agency May Lose Its Climate Focus



By John Schwartz

June 24, 2018

The Trump administration appears to be planning to shift the mission of one of the most important federal science agencies that works on climate change — away from climate change.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is part of the Department of Commerce, operates a constellation of earth-observing satellites. Because of its work on climate science data collection and analysis, it has become one of the most important American agencies for making sense of the warming planet. But that focus may shift, according to a slide presentation at a Department of Commerce meeting by Tim Gallaudet, the acting head of the agency.

In the presentation, which included descriptions of the past and present missions for the agency, the past mission listed three items, starting with “to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans and coasts.” In contrast, for the present mission, the word “climate” was gone, and the first line was replaced with “to observe, understand and predict atmospheric and ocean conditions.”

The presentation also included a new emphasis: “To protect lives and property, empower the economy, and support homeland and national security.”

NOAA’s sprawling mission includes the National Weather Service and management of the nation’s fisheries. Its use of satellites and scientific research to understand climate change has been an enormous part of its work in forecasting the cycles of phenomena such as El Niño and tracking hurricanes, as well as forecasting the coastal effects of rising seas.

While the past mission for the agency was focused on resiliency, including “healthy ecosystems, communities and economies that are resilient in the face of change,” the present mission, according the presentation, replaced that with a focus on “a safe, secure and growing economy empowered through accurate, reliable and timely environmental information.”

The presentation by Dr. Gallaudet, an oceanographer and retired Navy rear admiral, was part of a Department of Commerce “Vision Setting Summit.” While it is common for agencies to shift priorities under a new administration, sweeping changes to the core mission of an agency are unusual.

It is unclear whether a large shift in the federal science agency’s direction could be accomplished without extensive action by Congress. The agency’s current structure and mission are defined by 127 congressional mandates, and Congress passes the agency’s budget. Changing the agency’s focus would require an extensive rule-making process — a process that has proved troublesome to the Trump administration.



Images from NOAA showed coral damage around part of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument in 2016. Bernardo Vargas-Angel/NOAA, via Associated Press

Andrew A. Rosenberg, a former NOAA scientist and senior executive who now serves as director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists and who has seen the presentation material, issued a statement responding to the NOAA presentation that called the move “a shocking change in the mission of one of the nation’s premier scientific agencies.” The decision, he said, is “misguided and harmful to our country.”

“Understanding the changing climate is becoming more critical by the day, as the effects of global warming mount,” he added.

Climate research already protects the economy, Mr. Rosenberg said. “NOAA is continuously working to improve forecasts of extreme events, which are intensifying in a warming world. As we know from last year’s wildfires and hurricanes, these kind of forecasts are critical for protecting American lives and infrastructure.”

When asked for comment, Dr. Gallaudet said in a statement that the presentation was “a simplified draft for discussion.”

“It was not intended to create change in NOAA mission or policy from what it was before,” he said. “Any interpretation to the contrary is simply inaccurate.”

Another NOAA scientist said that he doubted the statements would lead to broad change. “This is really not a big change in the core mission,” said the scientist, who asked that his name not be used because he was not authorized to comment. “It’s all in how you interpret the slides. Climate won’t be highlighted but it will remain a fundamental part of the NOAA mission.”

Kevin Trenberth, a climate expert at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, said that the presentation “does raise alarm bells.” In an email, he asked, “Where is climate?”

“Instead of protecting and preserving ecosystems, it is one of exploitation,” he added. “The latter is especially offensive and shortsighted.”

The agency’s work on climate change has come under heated attack from Republican lawmakers in recent years. Representative Lamar Smith, a Republican from Texas who is chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, accused the Obama administration and federal researchers of manipulating global warming research to pursue, as he put it during a hearing in 2015, the administration’s “suspect climate agenda.”

In particular, Mr. Smith launched an investigation of the agency over a research paper that suggested that a supposed “hiatus” in the planet’s warming trend over a nearly 20-year period was the product of inaccurate data, and that the supposed pause in warming would all but disappear if better methodology were applied. The supposed hiatus has served as a frequent argument for

those who deny the overwhelming scientific evidence for planetary warming. The research was later validated, and global warming has continued: 17 of the 18 warmest years in the scientific record have occurred since 2001.

Dr. Trenbeth said that trying to eliminate climate from NOAA's mission was in line with previous congressional attacks on the agency. However, he said, there's no getting away from the centrality of understanding climate change to the agency's mission. "The fact is that improving weather and seasonal forecasts is now a climate problem: it inherently involves interactions among the atmosphere and ocean and land."

"The omission of anything related to climate, which includes El Niño, is extremely negligent," he said.

John Schwartz is part of the climate team. Since joining The Times in 2000, he has covered science, law, technology, the space program and more, and has written for almost every section. @jswatz • Facebook