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Key Assessment of Climate Threats, Cyberwar and Terrorism Goes “Missing” Under Trump

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

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What poses the bigger threat to the United States, terrorist attacks or flooding and extreme weather fueled by climate disruption? What about cyberwarfare, outbreaks of infectious disease or [crumbling infrastructure](#)?

Politicians give various answers to such questions, depending on their political priorities. For example, President Trump has scoffed at the threat of climate disruption while rolling back Obama-era environmental policies, [exiting the Paris Climate Agreement](#) and raising the [specter of international conflict](#) with countries such as Iran and North Korea.

What if experts and scientists across federal agencies compiled enough data to determine which of these threats are most likely to materialize in a given time frame, and at what cost to the nation? Such analysis could profoundly shape national priorities by helping voters and lawmakers decide what policies to support and where to direct tax dollars.


It turns out that this data and analysis does exist, according to [federal records](#). There's only one problem: It's apparently not available to the public.

In 2011, President Obama directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to create a “national preparedness” program. A key component of the program was the Strategic National Risk Assessment, a quantitative survey of data from various federal agencies and intelligence services on potential threats to national security and human life. The risks ranged from natural disasters like hurricanes to nuclear meltdowns, chemical spills and terrorist attacks.

The Strategic National Risk Assessment may have gone “missing” because it could cause political problems for the Trump administration, which has downplayed climate concerns.

An initial summary released in 2011 reveals that the assessment's ongoing analysis includes “a comparison of risks for potential incidents in terms of likelihood ... and consequences of threats of hazards,” as well as an analysis of the uncertainty surrounding those threats.

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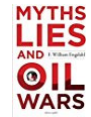
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In other words, the Strategic National Risk Assessment determines which types of attacks, accidents or natural disasters pose a threat to the country, how likely they are to occur, and if they do occur, what the potential damage would be.

The 2011 summary includes three categories of threats: “natural,” “technological/accidental” and “adversarial/human caused.” Natural events include earthquakes, wildfires, storms and floods, while technological/accidental events cover risks, such as food contamination, dam failures, radiation releases and chemical accidents. Adversarial threats are terrorist attacks, cyberattacks and “armed assaults” on US soil.

When the summary was released six years ago, the analysis estimating the frequency at which these threats are likely to occur (and the damage they could cause) remained classified. Some information from the Strategic National Risk Assessment was included in a [2015 DHS report](#) titled “National Preparedness Goal,” but again, the analysis detailing which types of incidents pose the biggest threat was not included in the publicly released report.

However, the 2015 DHS report, which was required under Obama’s “national preparedness” directive to outline national safety goals, states that climate change “has the potential to cause the consequence of weather-related hazards to become more severe.” The report notes that “rising sea levels” and “increasingly powerful storms” associated with climate change have already contributed to increased flooding. Meanwhile, it states, droughts and wildfires are becoming more severe.

The report also identified cybersecurity as an emerging concern based on information found in the Strategic National Risk Assessment. That was just two years before Russian hackers would be accused of exploiting US security vulnerabilities and using social media to influence voters in the 2016 election.

An unclassified version of the Strategic National Risk Assessment was completed in 2015, according to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a watchdog group representing federal workers. In September, the group requested a copy of the assessment from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the DHS office that [published a copy of the 2011 summary](#) on its website.

The case of the “missing” risk assessment appears to follow a pattern established early in the Trump administration.

[Email records](#) show that FEMA officials directed the request to another DHS office, the National Protection and Programs Directorate. However, an official in that office informed PEER that the request should be filed with FEMA instead.

FEMA then terminated the official request for the risk assessment under the Freedom of Information Act without producing the document, according to PEER.

Unable to determine which office is responsible for the whereabouts of the Strategic National Risk Assessment, PEER filed a lawsuit against DHS earlier this month. The group suggested that the Strategic National Risk Assessment may have gone “missing” because it could cause political problems for the Trump administration, which has downplayed climate concerns and has been criticized for its response to Russian cyberattacks.

“This inability to locate our national risk assessment suggests that America’s preparedness program is no longer informed by facts and analysis,” Jeff Ruch, executive director of PEER, said in a statement. “We hope our Strategic National Risk Assessment is not another political casualty of a regime rooted in ‘alternative facts.’”

In response to an inquiry from Truthout, a DHS spokesman said the agency does not comment on pending litigation. Officials at the DHS and FEMA did not respond to a follow-up question on the whereabouts of the Strategic National Risk Assessment, and whether the document is available to the public.

For those concerned about the threats posed by climate destruction, the case of the “missing” risk assessment appears to follow a pattern established early in the Trump administration.

Shortly after Trump took office, the Environmental Protection Agency [scrubbed](#) years of climate research from its website. Since then, the Trump administration has rolled back a number of Obama-era policies requiring federal agencies to consider and prepare for the impacts of climate change, according to Joel Scata, an attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

“This has been reflective of the Trump administration’s general basic abhorrence of the idea that we have to prepare for climate change,” Scata told Truthout in an interview. “They would rather bury their heads in the sand than actually address the issue.”

In a recent [blog](#) post, Scata points out that FEMA has removed any mention of climate change, rising sea levels and extreme weather from its annual [strategic plan](#) now that Trump

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is in office. The agency's [previous strategic plan](#), released under the Obama administration, acknowledged that climate change is already resulting in "quantifiable changes in the risks communities face" and pledged to integrate those concerns into disaster preparedness operations.

Meanwhile, the US suffered unprecedented financial losses due to extreme weather last year, including several hurricanes that battered coastlines and wildfires that consumed vast areas across western states. The total losses to extreme weather reached [a record-breaking \\$306 billion](#) in 2017, according to the National Centers for Environmental Information. Last year was also the warmest year on record in the United States.

The World Economic Forum's [Global Risks Report 2018](#) names natural disasters, extreme weather events and humanity's collective failure to respond to the threats of climate disruption as the top three risks currently facing the world. Whether experts in our own government agree remains a mystery, at least for now.

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