

## **Pentagon revised Obama-era report to remove risks from climate change**

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### **Body**

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WASHINGTON — Internal **changes** to a draft Defense Department report de-emphasized the threats **climate change** poses to military bases and installations, muting or removing references to **climate**-driven **changes** in the Arctic and potential risks from rising seas, an unpublished draft obtained by The Washington Post reveals. The earlier version of the document, dated December 2016, contains numerous references to "**climate change**" that were omitted or altered to "extreme weather" or simply "**climate**" in the final report, which was submitted to Congress in January 2018. While the phrase "**climate change**" appears 23 separate times in the draft report, the final version used it just once. Those and other edits suggest the Pentagon has adapted its approach to public discussion of **climate change** under President Donald Trump, who has expressed doubt about the reality of a phenomenon that scientists agree presents an increasing danger to the planet. While military leaders have said they see a **changing climate** as a driver of instability worldwide, they have also sought to stay out of a politically charged debate about its causes. Heather Babb, a Pentagon spokeswoman, declined to comment on the draft report, which outlines the results of the department's first survey of officials at different installations about the effects of **climate change**.

The Post was not able to verify who made the **changes** reflected in the two documents. "As highlighted in the report, the effects of **climate** are a national security issue with potential impacts to missions, operational plans, and installations," Babb said in a statement. "DOD continues to focus on ensuring its installations and infrastructure are resilient to a wide range of threats, including **climate**. The Department has a proven record of planning and preparing for such threats." According to John Conger, who served as a senior Pentagon official under the Obama administration and was among the officials who initiated the multi-base survey that forms the basis of the report, employees from a dozen different Defense Department offices could have made **changes** to the text as it made its way through the bureaucracy's clearance process, which often makes for "lowest common denominator" documents. Conger said the alterations "**change** the feeling of urgency in the report, but not its fundamental conclusion — that our military installations are clearly experiencing **climate** impacts." The final document, a 32-page report to Congress, was published more than a year after the earlier draft. It, like its earlier version, finds that out of more than 3,500 military sites around the world, 782 reported being affected by drought, 763 by major wind events, and 706 by flooding, along with other problems — results that drew considerable attention when they debuted in late January. But the December 2016 draft was far more direct in its discussion of **climate change** and in particular the issue of sea-level rise — a well-known problem facing many military sites in coastal areas, from the sprawling naval base in Norfolk to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site in the Pacific's remote Marshall Islands. Seas are currently rising by about 3.2 millimeters per year, and scientists fear the rise could accelerate in coming decades. The final Pentagon document even omits, in several cases, the simple observation that learning about bases' vulnerability to sea-level rise was a core part of the survey that is the subject of the report. That survey itself asked each military site how much of its area was located at elevations between 0-3, 0-6,

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0-9, or 0-12 feet above sea level. The final document also removes a map showing "those sites that indicated possible effects could occur due to increased mean sea level between 0-3 feet." (A few references to sea-level rise do remain in the final version of the report and in the survey questions themselves, contained in an appendix.) "The wordsmithing, not saying 'climate,' I could live with that," said Dennis McGinn, a retired Navy vice admiral who served as assistant secretary of the Navy for energy, installations and environment in the Obama administration, when some of the changes were described to him. "But taking out ... maps of critical areas of flooding, that's pretty fundamental. And the Arctic, that's huge, for a lot of reasons, not just for Department of Defense, but for the Coast Guard, and commercial shipping business." The report emerged from a process commenced by the previous administration, as officials in Washington sought to get a sense of how climate-related phenomena could affect military installations dotting the globe. President Barack Obama's focus on climate change created a sense of urgency for federal agencies, including the behemoth Defense Department, to prepare for its effects. The published version removes a reference to the National Climate Assessment, which the U.S. government, by law, undertakes every four years. It also omits several references to the decline of Arctic sea ice, an ongoing phenomenon that has been strongly attributed to climate change. One such case is found in a description of conditions at the Cape Lisburne radar station on Alaska's North Slope. A statement that "the past decades have seen a climate-related downward trend in the extent of Arctic sea ice coverage" does not appear in the final report, nor does a description of extreme weather events being "made more destructive by a reduction in sea ice and an increase in ice free periods," since without protective sea ice, large waves can pummel fragile Arctic coastlines during storms. And where the draft report says that shoreline erosion at the site is caused by "reduced sea ice coverage," the final document instead blames the damage on "sea ice fluctuations." In another omitted section, the draft document addresses ways in which a changing climate could affect the ability to train troops. "The changing climate could increase risk to the 420 endangered species that live on our installations, potentially leading to training and operating restrictions," the omitted section reads. "Increased high-heat days limit the training and testing activities our personnel can safely perform without appropriate rest periods," it continues. The survey at the center of the report, in its various versions, asked military installations a battery of detailed questions about different extreme events that have affected them, along with requesting information about installations' elevation and vulnerability to sea level rise. Among the questions asked were: — "Has your installation been negatively impacted by wind?" — "Has your installation been negatively impacted by extreme hot or cold temperatures?" — "What might be negatively impacted/degraded with an increase of 0 to 12 feet in mean sea level?" Current and former officials said that the wording and content of the report was unlikely to have a bearing on how the military services respond — or do not respond — to climate change. In some ways, the military has been seen as proactive in its attitude to climate issues, seeking to protect infrastructure in places such as Norfolk from changing weather, producing a massive climate change "road map" and planning for changes in the Arctic. In other ways, however, the military has taken only modest action as it operates its massive network of power-intensive bases and air, ship and vehicle fleets, and provides food and housing to its personnel around the world. "I think in DOD, there is generally a belief, it's more important what you do than to fight about how you talk about it," said Jeffrey Marqusee, a former director of environmental and energy research and development at the office of the secretary of defense. "It's not like they've generally been in denial mode," said Sherri Goodman, who served as deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security in the Clinton administration. "They've generally been pretty forthcoming."

## Graphic

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Wave-driven flooding and overwash on Roi-Namur Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands. MUST CREDIT: photo courtesy of Peter Swarzenski, U.S. Geological Survey. A before and after comparison of how different versions of the Pentagon document described what the survey questions contained. MUST CREDIT: The Washington Post. Before and after versions of a discussion of the effects of Arctic change on a Pentagon site in Alaska. MUST CREDIT: The Washington Post.

## Classification

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