

By Coral Davenport and Mark Landler

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WASHINGTON — President Trump has rolled back environmental regulations, pulled the United States out of the Paris climate accord, brushed aside dire predictions about the effects of climate change, and turned the term “global warming” into a punch line rather than a prognosis.

Now, after two years spent unraveling the policies of his predecessors, Mr. Trump and his political appointees are launching a new assault.

In the next few months, the White House will complete the rollback of the most significant federal effort to curb greenhouse-gas emissions, initiated during the Obama administration. It will expand its efforts to impose Mr. Trump’s hard-line views on other nations, building on his retreat from the Paris accord and his recent refusal to sign a communiqué to protect the rapidly melting Arctic region unless it was stripped of any references to climate change.

And, in what could be Mr. Trump’s most consequential action yet, his administration will seek to undermine the very science on which climate change policy rests.

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MR. TRUMP IS LESS AN IDEOLOGUE THAN AN ARMCHAIR NAYSAYER ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE, ACCORDING TO PEOPLE WHO KNOW HIM. HE CAME INTO OFFICE VIEWING AGENCIES LIKE THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY AS BASTIONS OF WHAT HE CALLS THE “DEEP STATE,” AND HIS CONTEMPT FOR THEIR PAST WORK ON THE ISSUE IS AN ANIMATING FACTOR IN TRYING TO FORCE THEM TO ABANDON KEY ASPECTS OF THE METHODOLOGY THEY USE TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF A DANGEROUSLY WARMING PLANET.

AS A RESULT, PARTS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WILL NO LONGER FULFILL WHAT SCIENTISTS SAY IS ONE OF THE MOST URGENT JOBS OF CLIMATE SCIENCE STUDIES: REPORTING ON THE FUTURE EFFECTS OF A RAPIDLY WARMING PLANET AND PRESENTING A PICTURE OF WHAT THE EARTH COULD LOOK LIKE BY THE END OF THE CENTURY IF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY CONTINUES TO EMIT HEAT-TRAPPING CARBON DIOXIDE POLLUTION FROM BURNING FOSSIL FUELS.

THE ATTACK ON SCIENCE IS UNDERWAY THROUGHOUT THE GOVERNMENT. IN THE MOST RECENT EXAMPLE, THE WHITE HOUSE-APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, JAMES REILLY, A FORMER ASTRONAUT AND PETROLEUM GEOLOGIST, HAS ORDERED THAT SCIENTIFIC ASSESSMENTS PRODUCED BY THAT OFFICE USE ONLY COMPUTER-GENERATED CLIMATE MODELS THAT PROJECT THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE THROUGH 2040, RATHER THAN THROUGH THE END OF THE CENTURY, AS HAD BEEN DONE PREVIOUSLY.

President Trump has pushed to resurrect the idea of holding public debates on the validity of climate science. Doug Mills/The New York Times

The administration's prime target has been the National Climate Assessment, produced by an interagency task force roughly every four years since 2000. Government scientists used computer-generated models in their most recent report to project that if fossil fuel emissions continue unchecked, the earth's atmosphere could warm by as much as eight degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century. That would lead to drastically higher sea levels, more devastating storms and droughts, crop failures, food losses and severe health consequences. Work on the next report, which is expected to be released in 2021 or 2022, has already begun. But from now on, officials said, such worst-case scenario projections will not automatically be included in the National Climate Assessment or in some other scientific reports produced by the government.

"What we have here is a pretty blatant attempt to politicize the science — to push the science in a direction that's consistent with their politics," said Philip B. Duffy, the president of the Woods Hole Research Center, who served on a National Academy of Sciences panel that reviewed the government's most recent National Climate Assessment. "It reminds me of the Soviet Union."

In an email, James Hewitt, a spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency, defended the proposed changes.

"The previous use of inaccurate modeling that focuses on worst-case emissions scenarios, that does not reflect real-world conditions, needs to be thoroughly re-examined and tested if such information is going to serve as the scientific foundation of nationwide decision-making now and in the future," Mr. Hewitt said.

However, the goal of political appointees in the Trump administration is not just to change the

climate assessment's methodology, which has broad scientific consensus, but also to question its conclusions by creating a new climate review panel. That effort is led by a 79-year-old physicist who had a respected career at Princeton but has become better known in recent years for attacking the science of man-made climate change and for defending the virtues of carbon dioxide — sometimes to an awkward degree.

“The demonization of carbon dioxide is just like the demonization of the poor Jews under Hitler,” said the physicist, William Happer, who serves on the National Security Council as the president's deputy assistant for emerging technologies.

William Happer, who serves on the National Security Council, is pushing to create a climate review panel that would question scientific consensus.

Pool photo by Albin Lohr-Jones

“That is one of the most crude messages one could deliver,” said R. Nicholas Burns, who served as the NATO ambassador under George W. Bush.

The push to alter the results of at least some climate science reports, several officials said, came after November's release of the second volume of the National Climate Assessment.

While the Trump administration did not try to rewrite the scientific conclusions of the report, officials sought to play it down — releasing it the day after Thanksgiving — and discredit it, with a White House statement calling it “largely based on the most extreme scenario.”

Still, the report could create legal problems for Mr. Trump's agenda of abolishing regulations. This summer, the E.P.A. is expected to finalize the legal rollback of two of President Barack Obama's most consequential policies: federal regulations to curb planet-warming pollution from vehicle tailpipes and power plant smokestacks.

Opponents say that when they challenge the moves in court, they intend to point to the climate assessment, asking how the government can justify the reversals when its own agencies have concluded that the pollution will be so harmful.

That is why officials are now discussing how to influence the conclusions of the next National Climate Assessment.

“They’ve started talking about how they can produce a report that doesn’t lead to some silly alarmist predictions about the future,” said Myron Ebell, who heads the energy program at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, an industry-funded research organization, and who led the administration’s transition at the E.P.A.

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