

Scientists are conspicuously missing from Trump's government

By **Chris Mooney** March 13

President Trump has moved to fill just one of 46 key science and technology positions that help the government counter risks ranging from chemical and biological attacks to rising seas, a Washington Post analysis has found.

The vacancies in the 46 Senate-confirmed posts range from the president's science adviser, to the administrators of NASA and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to the chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. The Post analysis was based on a [listing](#) of top federal science and technology positions compiled by the National Academy of Sciences, combined with an [ongoing analysis](#) by The Washington Post and the Partnership for Public Service of over 500 key Senate-confirmed government slots that must be filled.

Trump's first nominee to one of these top science posts, named on Friday, is [physician Scott Gottlieb](#) for Food and Drug Administration commissioner. With this move, Trump actually found a candidate for this job earlier than Barack Obama did in 2009.

But that's the exception — in general, the slow pace of filling these positions puts Trump well behind his predecessor. Other administrations have been slow to populate senior science posts, but policy experts say that Trump's stands out because of its combination of thin science staffing with sharp proposed budget cuts to government science programs.

"I think it's been common over the decades for science appointments to lag — in other words, science is often not seen as a priority," said physicist Rush Holt, a former member of Congress and now the chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "It seems worse now, and it's not just because the appointments are slow, but there really has been not even any rhetoric from the administration that shows that they

think science is important to them.”

Meanwhile, Trump “beachhead teams” at federal agencies, whose members do not require Senate confirmation, have included people whose views diverge from science consensus positions, such as the former Heritage Foundation fellow David Kreutzer at the Environmental Protection Agency. Kreutzer has written that “no consensus exists that man-made emissions are the primary driver of global warming.” The head of that agency, Scott Pruitt, also recently made a striking statement challenging the human causation of climate change, leading to widespread criticism.

In response to queries about the filling of science positions and the Post’s analysis, the White House said it would not comment on matters involving personnel.

But it is far from clear that Trump intends to fill all of these roles: Recently, the president told Fox News that he may not fill many political posts in his government. “A lot of those jobs, I don’t want to appoint, because they’re unnecessary to have,” Trump said. Meanwhile, staff members at the Council on Environmental Quality were directed to move out of their historic headquarters near the White House last month.

Trump also signed an executive order Monday outlining a “comprehensive” plan to reshape the federal government’s executive branch, directing his Office of Management and Budget to come up with a plan, over the course of the next half year or more, that may include “recommendations to eliminate unnecessary agencies, components of agencies, and agency programs, and to merge functions.” This could potentially lead to elimination of some science related programs and positions.

There could also be more mundane reasons for the delay in filling jobs, such as the difficulty the president has had in getting his Cabinet nominees confirmed. These delays make it difficult to move down the ladder and consider lower-ranking agency posts.

“In general, administrations have been slow off the mark in filling their jobs,” said Max Stier, the president and chief executive of the Partnership for Public Service, which monitors the federal government’s workforce, including the more than 500 Senate-confirmed leadership jobs that each administration must fill. “This administration has been even slower.”

Drawing on a list of leading science and technology positions identified in 2008 by the National Academy of Sciences, The Post identified 55 in total that Trump has the opportunity to fill.

Forty-six of these posts require Senate confirmation. Trump has moved to fill just one of these, picking Gottlieb to head the FDA on Friday.

An additional nine key posts do not require Senate confirmation. Most of these are White House posts, and Trump has named five people to these positions.

They include Gary Cohn, director of the White House National Economic Council, as well as Jeremy Katz and Kenneth Juster, who serve as deputy directors of the council. Juster also serves in a deputy staff role at the National Security Council with a focus on international economic affairs.

While these might not sound like science- and technology-related posts, they do touch on these areas. Indeed, when former secretary of state James Baker and other Republican luminaries visited the White House recently to pitch a carbon tax plan, they met with Cohn.

In addition, Trump's administration has filled two out of three associate director positions at the Office of Management and Budget, which make key decisions about science funding and science-based regulations, according to OMB spokesman Coalter Baker. These so-called "program associate directors" are now in place to cover natural resources and health.

Unfilled science posts under Trump range from the president's science adviser — the single most important of these jobs in the eyes of the scientific community — to the director of the U.S. Geological Survey. There are dozens of open science posts at federal agencies ranging from Defense and Transportation to the Department of the Interior.

In the meantime, as throughout much of the federal government, many of these posts are filled by career civil servants who step up to leadership posts as administrations transition, and serve in an "acting" capacity.

The contrast with the Obama administration is striking: It had hired people or announced nominees for at least nine of these prominent science-related posts by the end of January 2009 — both Senate confirmed and non-Senate confirmed — and at least 18 by the end of March of that year, according to a database of appointments and their timing provided by the Partnership for Public Service, as well as additional research. One of those posts, however — the undersecretary for energy and environment at the Department of Energy — no longer exists.

Despite these large science gaps, the Trump administration is expected to propose deep cuts to science-focused agencies, such as the EPA, Energy Department, and NOAA, according to numerous press reports, including several by The Post.

Large proposed cuts at the EPA are expected to target that agency's Office of Research and Development, whose Senate-confirmed director is one of the many unfilled roles at the moment. Proposed cuts to NOAA would slash satellite programming and key research initiatives relating to studying the oceans and fortifying the coasts against

sea level rise.

All of this sets Trump apart not only from Obama but also from the last Republican president, George W. Bush. Bush took many months to appoint a federal science adviser, but he did not set out to so sweepingly cut science budgets and science-focused agencies.

The delays and uncertainties over appointments, and reports that NOAA and other science agencies have been targeted for major cuts, are worrying to the scientific community.

“It’s not surprising it’s taking a long time because they’re obviously taking a long time putting the Cabinet together, but it’s especially problematic in this administration because they appear to want to move extremely rapidly on major policy changes that do have science or should have science at the base of it,” said Neal Lane, the Rice University physicist who served as Bill Clinton’s second White House science adviser.

That includes not only budget cuts but restructuring the science-infused federal regulatory process and rolling back numerous science-based environmental regulations.

There’s also concern that short-staffing of scientists could leave the Trump administration unprepared to handle a science-based crisis — such as a new emergence of bird flu with an increased ability to be transmitted between humans.

“I’ve tried to make the case to the administration that a science adviser is important for them, for their success,” said Holt. “That this is not just a representative of the science community that they need, but rather they need somebody on staff to help them deal with immediate crises that require some expertise in dealing with, or, for longer term strategic planning.”

The analysis of science posts in the Trump administration is based on a list of “key science and technology positions” compiled in a 2008 report by the National Academy of Sciences, the large majority of which are Senate-confirmed positions. These are “priority key appointments that a new administration should address in the first months after the inauguration,” the science advisory body said. Only a few of these posts have changed or been eliminated since 2008; these were not included.

This list of posts was then cross-referenced with a regularly updated database, maintained by The Post and the Partnership for Public Service, of top administration posts and how many have thus far been filled or at least seen nominees. For posts that did not appear on that list — which only features positions that require Senate confirmation — additional research was conducted in an attempt to determine whether they had been filled.

The analysis did not include the 24-member National Science Board at the National Science Foundation, which is currently filled with members serving six-year terms, or other posts with fixed terms.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment on the status of the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, or PCAST, a White House scientific advisory body originally assembled by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. Its members do not require Senate confirmation. Currently, PCAST is not listed on the White House website for the Office of Science and Technology Policy, as it was during the Obama years. Obama named two co-chairs of PCAST on Dec. 20, 2008, a month before his inauguration.

Perhaps the biggest science gap in the Trump administration is the lack of a White House science adviser, whose job is to feed the president valid scientific information and shape the federal science budget across agencies.

“It’s very detrimental to be putting together a budget proposal without a science adviser in the White House,” said John Holdren, Obama’s science adviser, who was named a month before the president’s inauguration. “One has to worry that in that situation, people speaking up for other parts of the budget will be heard and there will be nobody speaking up for the science parts of the budget.”

The last two Democratic presidents — Clinton and Obama — moved considerably more quickly to appoint their science advisers than the last two Republican presidents (George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush).

Not everyone believes that a presidential science adviser is even necessary. The conservative Heritage Foundation, known to be very influential with the new administration, proposed abolishing the office.

“There are plenty of scientists who would be happy to give advice to the White House, and there’s a lot of different challenges,” said Heritage Foundation fellow Nick Loris, who focuses on energy and environmental policy. “So why not rely on specific expertise, rather than a broad, general senior official?”

In Trump’s case, though, that’s just what many scientists are afraid of. Thus far Trump has appeared to get scientific consultation from places that aren’t necessarily representative of the mainstream — he’s met with a critic of vaccinations, the Princeton physicist William Happer, who thinks global warming will be beneficial to the world because it will boost plant growth, and the conservative Yale computer scientist David Gelernter, who has also expressed skepticism about climate change.

Happer and Gelernter are sometimes mentioned as possible candidates for the role of Trump’s science adviser. But if either were named, there likely would be an uproar in the scientific community, because of their opposition to the established science on climate change.

—*Lisa Rein contributed to this report.*


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