



Observations

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Monumental Disaster at the Department of the Interior

A new report documents suppression of science, denial of climate change, the silencing and intimidation of staff

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By Joel Clement on December 4, 2018



Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Credit: Mark Wilson *Getty Images*

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This is a tough time to be a federal scientist—or any civil servant in the federal government. The Trump administration is clamping down on science, denying dangerous climate change and hollowing out the workforces of the agencies charged with protecting American health, safety and natural resources.

At the Department of the Interior (DOI), with its mission to conserve and manage America's natural and cultural resources, the Trump administration's political appointees are stumbling over one another to earn accolades for disabling agency operations. I should know; I was one of dozens of senior executives targeted by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke for reassignment in a staff purge just six months into the new administration.

From that day onward, Zinke and his political staff have consistently sidelined scientists and experts while handing the agency’s keys over to oil, gas and mining interests. The only saving grace is that Zinke and his colleagues are not very good at it, and in many cases the courts are stopping them in their tracks. The effects on science, scientists and the federal workforce, however, will be long-lasting.

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A DAMNING REPORT

In a new report, *Science Under Siege at the Department of the Interior*, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has documented some of the most egregious and anti-science policies and practices at the DOI under Secretary Zinke. The report describes suppression of science, denial of climate change, the silencing and intimidation of agency staff, and attacks on science-based laws that help protect our nation’s world-class wildlife and

habitats.

It is a damning report and required reading for anyone who values public lands, wildlife, cultural heritage, and health and safety.

It would be impossible to cover everything this clumsy political wrecking crew is up to, but the report provides details on the most prominent actions that deserve greater scrutiny, such as: the largest reduction in public lands protection in our nation's history; a systematic failure to acknowledge or act on climate change; unprecedented constraints on the funding and communication of science; and a blatant disregard for public health and safety.

Why is this administration so scared of science? Why cancel a study into the health effects of mountaintop removal coal mining so soon after lifting a moratorium on coal leasing on public lands? Why keep scientists from speaking with the press? Because, while science provides the best evidence we have for making policy decisions that serve the broader public, Ryan Zinke has been very clear that he is in office to serve the oil, gas and mining industries, not the general public.

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THE ATTACKS ON SCIENCE NEVER STOP

It is challenging to keep up with the relentless attacks on science coming from Secretary Zinke and his team of political appointees. Since the finalization of UCS's report, we have seen Secretary Zinke blame "radical environmental groups" as the cause of wildfires, with no mention of climate change, which scientists know is creating the conditions for bigger, hotter, more ferocious fires. Like President Trump, he continues to suggest that poor forest management is the real reason for the deadly fires, regardless of whether they occur in suburbs or shrublands, far from federally managed forests. His ignorance of science is perhaps only surpassed by that of his boss.

It has also recently come to light that DOI has taken steps to roll back protections for individuals impacted the most by the agency's anti-science actions. In November, it was reported that DOI rescinded two environmental justice policy memos that were put in place over 20 years ago to reverse decades of environmental racism and the marginalization of low-income communities. This is an affront to Native American communities suffering from the ongoing impacts of fossil fuel development.



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Zinke's disdain for science was on display again the day after Thanksgiving, when the Trump administration quietly released two groundbreaking climate reports that featured the work of DOI scientists: the 2018 National Climate Assessment (NCA) and a report on the greenhouse-gas emissions produced from fossil fuel development on federal lands. The NCA describes a stark future for the United States if climate change is left unchecked: destructive sea-level rise, long-lasting droughts, infectious disease outbreaks and crippling economic costs. The federal lands emissions report pointed out that carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels produced on federal lands represent nearly 24% of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. These are vitally important reports sounding a clarion call that climate action on federal lands is essential to the safety and well-being of the American public.

How did Zinke respond? With the standard anti-science lies being trotted out by Trump and others in the administration. Like his colleagues, Zinke claimed that the NCA was based only on extreme scenarios, when in fact it considered a broad range of emissions scenarios; he also claimed that the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) at DOI had "concerns" with the NCA when in fact dozens of USGS staff, as well as scientists from other DOI bureaus, were co-authors and contributors to the report. Apparently he didn't have time to get to the other administration talking point about how climate scientists are just trying to get rich off of their work—a laughable assertion for anyone familiar with the compensation afforded to scientists who volunteer to contribute to such reports. He had nothing at all to say about the federal lands emissions report that was produced entirely within DOI.

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A DESECRATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE

It is a desecration of the concept of public service for Zinke to ignore science aimed to protect the public's best interest, and an insult to the taxpayers who pay his salary and those of his political colleagues. Zinke won't be around forever, but he has filled the ranks of political appointees at DOI with like-minded industry lobbyists and climate deniers, so things are not likely to change at Interior anytime soon unless Congress, with a vocal public behind it, insists on transparency, scientific integrity and immediate climate action.

America's public lands, and the natural and cultural resources they contain, belong to all of us. It is astounding that a small group of ideologues thinks they can hand these resources, and the agencies that manage them, over to industries eager to carve them up for private profit. To do so with blithe disregard for the impact upon our planet's operating system is careless and dangerous, and we must demand better.

In addition to the comprehensive new report, UCS is providing resources and support for Americans eager to fight for science in our democracy while supporting federal scientists under siege. A new Congress will soon be asking harder questions and holding DOI leadership accountable for its actions. We can make it much harder for Zinke and his colleagues to run roughshod over the agency at the expense of our health, our safety, our

heritage and our shared public lands.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Joel Clement

Joel Clement served as director of the Office of Policy Analysis in the U.S. Department of the Interior. He left DOI in 2017 and is now a Senior Fellow with the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

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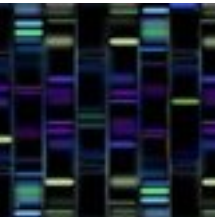
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