

SundayReview | EDITORIAL

President Trump's War on Science

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD SEPT. 9, 2017

The news was hard to digest until one realized it was part of a much larger and increasingly disturbing pattern in the Trump administration. On Aug. 18, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine received an order from the Interior Department that it stop work on what seemed a useful and overdue study of the health risks of mountaintop-removal coal mining.

The \$1 million study had been requested by two West Virginia health agencies following multiple studies suggesting increased rates of birth defects, cancer and other health problems among people living near big surface coal-mining operations in Appalachia. The order to shut it down came just hours before the scientists were scheduled to meet with affected residents of Kentucky.

The Interior Department said the project was put on hold as a result of an agencywide budgetary review of grants and projects costing more than \$100,000.

This was not persuasive to anyone who had been paying attention. From Day 1, the White House and its lackeys in certain federal agencies have been waging what amounts to a war on science, appointing people with few scientific credentials to key positions, defunding programs that could lead to a cleaner and safer

environment and a healthier population, and, most ominously, censoring scientific inquiry that could inform the public and government policy.

Even allowing for justifiable budgetary reasons, in nearly every case the principal motive seemed the same: to serve commercial interests whose profitability could be affected by health and safety rules.

The coal mining industry is a conspicuous example. The practice of blowing the tops off mountains to get at underlying coal seams has been attacked for years by public health and environmental interests and by many of the families whose livelihoods depend on coal. But Mr. Trump and his department heads have made a very big deal of saving jobs in a declining industry that is already under severe pressure from market forces, including competition from cheaper natural gas. An unfavorable health study would inject unwelcome reality into Mr. Trump's rosy promises of a job boom fueled by "clean, beautiful coal."

This is a president who has never shown much fidelity to facts, unless they are his own alternative ones. Yet if there is any unifying theme beyond that to the administration's war on science, apart from its devotion to big industry and its reflexively antiregulatory mind-set, it is horror of the words "climate change."

This starts with Mr. Trump, who has called global warming a hoax and pulled the United States from the Paris agreement on climate change. Among his first presidential acts, he instructed Scott Pruitt, the Environmental Protection Agency administrator, to deep-six President Obama's Clean Power Plan, aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, and ordered Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to roll back Obama-era rules reducing the venting from natural gas wells of methane, another powerful greenhouse gas.

Mr. Trump has been properly sympathetic to the victims of hurricanes Harvey and Irma, but the fact that there is almost certainly a connection between a warming earth and increasingly destructive natural events seems not to have occurred to him or his fellow deniers. Mr. Pruitt and his colleagues have enthusiastically jumped to the task of rescinding regulations that might address the problem, meanwhile presiding over a no less ominous development: a governmentwide purge of people, particularly scientists, whose research and conclusions about the human contribution to climate change do not support the

administration's agenda.

Mr. Pruitt, for instance, is replacing dozens of members on the E.P.A.'s scientific advisory boards; in March, he dismissed at least five scientists from the agency's 18-member Board of Scientific Counselors, to be replaced, according to a spokesman, with advisers "who understand the impact of regulations on the regulated community." Last month the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration dissolved its 15-member climate science advisory committee, a panel set up to help translate the findings of the National Climate Assessment into concrete guidance for businesses, governments and the public.

In June, Mr. Pruitt told a coal industry lobbying group that he was preparing to convene a "red team" of researchers to challenge the notion, broadly accepted among climate scientists, that carbon dioxide and other emissions from fossil fuels are the primary drivers of climate change.

Andrew Dessler, a professor of atmospheric science at Texas A&M University, called the red team plan a "dumb idea" that's like "a red team-blue team exercise about whether gravity exists." Rick Perry, the energy secretary, former Texas governor and climate skeptic, endorsed the idea as — get this — a way to "get the politicians out of the room." Given his and Mr. Pruitt's ideological and historical financial ties to the fossil fuel industry, it is hard to think of a more cynical use of public money.

Even the official vocabulary of global warming has changed, as if the problem can be made to evaporate by describing it in more benign terms. At the Department of Agriculture, staff members are encouraged to use words like "weather extremes" in lieu of "climate change," and "build soil organic matter, increase nutrient use efficiency" instead of "reduce greenhouse gases." The Department of Energy has scrubbed the words "clean energy" and "new energy" from its websites, and has cut links to clean or renewable energy initiatives and programs, according to the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative, which monitors federal websites.

At the E.P.A., a former Trump campaign assistant named John Konkus aims to eliminate the "double C-word," meaning "climate change," from the agency's research grant solicitations, and he views every application for research money

through a similar lens. The E.P.A. is even considering editing out climate change-related exhibits in a museum depicting the agency's history.

The bias against science finds reinforcement in Mr. Trump's budget and the people he has chosen for important scientific jobs. Mr. Trump's 2018 federal budget proposal would cut nondefense research and development money across the government.

The president has proposed cutting nearly \$6 billion from the National Institutes of Health, the nation's single largest funder of biomedical research. The National Science Foundation, a government agency that funds a variety of scientific and engineering research projects, would be trimmed by about 11 percent. Plant and animal-related science at the Agriculture Department, data analysis at the Census Bureau and earth science at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration would all suffer.

It is amazing but true, given the present circumstances, that the Trump budget would eliminate \$250 million for NOAA's coastal research programs that prepare communities for rising seas and worsening storms. The E.P.A.'s Global Change program would be likewise eliminated. This makes the budget director, Mick Mulvaney, delirious with joy. He complains of "crazy things" the Obama administration did to study climate, and boasts: "Do a lot of the E.P.A. reductions aim at reducing the focus on climate science? Yes."

As to key appointments, denial and mediocrity abound. Last week, Mr. Trump nominated David Zatezalo, a former coal company chief executive who has repeatedly clashed with federal mine safety regulators, as assistant secretary of labor for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. He nominated Jim Bridenstine, a Republican congressman from Oklahoma with no science or space background, as NASA administrator. Sam Clovis, Mr. Trump's nomination to be the Agriculture Department's chief scientist, is not a scientist: He's a former talk-radio host and incendiary blogger who has labeled climate research "junk science."

From the beginning, Mr. Trump, Mr. Pruitt, Mr. Zinke and Mr. Perry — to name the Big Four on environmental and energy issues — have been promising a new day to just about anyone discomfited by a half-century of bipartisan environmental law, whether it be the developers and farmers who feel threatened

by efforts to enforce the Clean Water Act, oil and gas drillers seeking leases they do not need on federal land, chemical companies seeking relaxation from rules governing dangerous pesticides, automakers asked to improve fuel efficiency or utilities required to make further investments in technology to reduce ground-level pollutants.

“The future ain’t what it used to be at the E.P.A.,” Mr. Pruitt is fond of saying of his agency. These words could also apply to just about every other cabinet department and regulatory body in this administration. What his words really mean is that the future isn’t going to be nearly as promising for ordinary Americans as it should be.

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