

Global temperatures set new highs for third consecutive year

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Global average surface temperatures set a new record high in 2016, according to the latest data collected by NASA and an independent analysis by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Temperatures exceeded the records previously set in 2014 and 2015. It is the first time since modern temperature recordkeeping began in 1880 that Earth's average surface temperature set new record highs for three years in a row.

Moreover, January through September of 2016 (except for June) were the warmest on record for those respective months. The average monthly temperatures in October, November and December were second only to the highs set in 2015. The 17 warmest years on record have all occurred since 1998.

This latest temperature data confirms the planet's long-term warming trend. Certain weather phenomena, such as El Nino and La Nina respectively, can cause positive or negative spikes in the temperature. However, their impact is relatively small compared to the overall increase in global surface temperatures, which have risen by an average of 1.1 degrees Celsius since the late 19th century. The primary driving factor of this change in Earth's climate is the increasing amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere as a result of human activity.

While these findings are supported by the vast majority of the scientific community, members of the incoming Trump administration have disputed both the validity of the science as a whole and the impact humans have had on global warming. Trump himself has called climate change a "hoax" and a "very expensive form of tax" and has tweeted, "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive."

Though Trump has brushed off this last comment as a

joke, it coincides with certain corporate interests that will be embodied in the new administration. Trump's nomination for the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which oversees the rules governing carbon and waste emissions in the United States, is Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, who has fervently advocated for the deregulation of greenhouse gases in order to prop up the coal, oil and gas industry.

In a signal of his commitment to these interests, Pruitt stated during his nomination hearing before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that he intends "to run [the EPA] in a way that fosters both responsible protection of the environment and freedom for American businesses."

This perspective coincides with others on Trump's EPA transition team. These include David Schnare, who falsely claimed that climate scientist Michael Mann was guilty of scientific malpractice regarding global warming, and Myron Ebell, who is a member the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a right-wing advocacy group that denies climate change. Schnare and Ebell are joined by figures from the Heritage Foundation, an organization that states in its policy document for 2017, "The next President's budget should prohibit all federal agencies from regulating greenhouse gas emissions," and that there is "no evidence" of the potentially catastrophic consequences of global warming.

One of Pruitt's likely targets will be Obama's Clean Power Plan from 2015, which is one of the reasons Trump's presidential transition team has described the EPA as "an out-of-control anti-energy agenda that has destroyed millions of jobs." Yet this measure, which was hailed at the time as a "sweeping" and "uncompromising" step by the Obama administration

to address climate change, places virtually no practical greenhouse gas regulations on the power sector.

The Clean Power Plan, for example, sets as its goal a 32 percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from the power sector by 2030. In real terms, this would mean a 475 million ton reduction in annual power plant carbon output. However, these emissions have already declined by 405 million tons between 2005 and 2013, meaning that Obama's measures called for a reduction in emissions only half as fast as the declines that were already occurring.

Moreover, the policy was aimed at accommodating the rise in natural gas use in power plants that has come about over the past decade as a result of hydraulic fracturing (fracking). The extraction process has been shown to be damaging to the surrounding water and air quality, yet this is not accounted for in the Clean Power Plan. Nor is the risk of a methane leak during the drilling process; methane is a powerful greenhouse gas and can offset lower carbon dioxide emissions coming from power plants.

Obama also defended BP after the company's offshore drilling rig Deepwater Horizon exploded in 2010, leaking crude oil across the Gulf of Mexico and causing an estimated \$1 trillion in economic and environmental damage to the region.

Internationally, the Obama administration has only used the issue of climate change to further its geopolitical interests. During the Paris climate talks of 2015, Obama made an oblique criticism of China as he commented that countries should be held accountable to their emission reduction pledges, while at the same time ensuring that any goals set at the conference were nonbinding. This was also an attempt to court the various European powers to align themselves with the US's "Pivot to Asia," even as those same governments were becoming more involved in China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, established as an attempt to counter the influence of the dollar as the world's reserve currency.

Ultimately, the differences between the Obama administration and the Trump administration will not be over genuine concerns about the health of the environment, but about the nature of any sort of regulations on the fossil fuel industry. Obama paid lip service to ending global warming while implementing business-friendly rules. On the other hand, Trump's

administration will focus on dismantling not merely Obama's policies but whatever environmental gains have been made in previous decades.



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