

# Trump administration silences government environmental scientists

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The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) abruptly canceled talks by three scientists just days before a planned workshop Monday in Providence, Rhode Island. The move heightened concerns of scientific suppression at the agency, in particular related to climate change research.

The workshop Monday capped a three-year long assessment of Narragansett Bay, funded in part by EPA, to help improve water quality in the million-acre watershed. The scientists barred from speaking were Autumn Oczkowski, a Research Ecologist in EPA's National Health and Environmental Effects Research Laboratory, who was set to give the keynotes address which addressed the issue of climate change; Rose Martin, a postdoctoral fellow who works with Oczkowski; and Emily Shumenchia, an ecologist contracted by EPA.

A key component of the assessment, and one that conflicts with the political agenda of the Trump administration, is the documentation that climate change is already impacting the environmental health of the Bay and recognition that it will pose significant challenges in the future.

Since taking office in February, EPA head Scott Pruitt has initiated a multi-pronged effort to rollback and suppress the agency's work on climate change. Those two words are being scrubbed from agency web pages. The newly released 38-page draft EPA Strategic Plan for 2018-2022 omits any acknowledgment of a warming planet.

On the regulatory side, Pruitt this month signed a formal proposal to withdraw rules requiring power plants to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. And despite the administration's diversionary claims that the causes of global warming are an unsettled question, their proposed budget hammers the agency's Air, Climate

and Energy research program with 50 percent cuts.

An EPA spokesman confirmed the decision to prevent the scientists from speaking at the workshop Monday, but refused to give a justification—a tacit admission that political motivations lay behind it.

“It’s definitely a blatant example of the scientific censorship we all suspected was going to start being enforced at EPA,” John King, a co-chair of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program science advisory committee told the *New York Times*. “They don’t believe in climate change, so I think what they’re trying to do is stifle discussions of the impacts.”

Immediately after arriving at EPA, Pruitt instituted a new policy to require that all staff submit details of upcoming events for central vetting. Previously decisions to speak at conferences and workshops were made by supervisors and program managers, only rarely elevated in controversial cases. The muzzling of scientists in Narragansett marks the first instance that has come to public light. It is unknown how often the agency has denied speaking engagements in the ten months since Pruitt’s appointment.

Among the panels on which the silenced EPA staff were to appear was one titled, “The Present and Future Biological Implications of Climate Change.” As the title suggests, the warming waters, rising sea levels and more intense rainfall documented locally are intimately tied to the ecological health of one of New England’s largest and most diverse estuaries. While water quality in Narragansett Bay has improved significantly over the previous decades largely as a result of improved wastewater treatment, this progress is under threat from a changing climate.

The observed local climate impacts, including changes in species due to warmer water, are expected to lead to more severe consequences in the future. Among

these include “potential ripple effects on the food web” as the amount and type of phytoplankton in the Bay alter. The report also notes amplified risks of flooding as rising sea levels and bigger storms combine with urbanization trends which reduce the capacity of the watershed to retain water.

Such conclusions directly contradict the interests behind the Trump administration’s environmental program, in which no amount of scientific evidence can outweigh the short-term profit interests of American corporations.



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