

How Bush and Co. Obscure the Science

By Jeremy Symons

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Christine Todd Whitman's tenure at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ended last month much the way it began, amid controversy over the Bush administration's unwillingness to craft an effective response to global warming. Whitman arrived just before the president reversed a campaign promise to reduce global warming pollution from power plants. As she leaves, leaked EPA documents suggest that the White House attempted to rewrite an EPA report to play down the risks of global warming.

Regardless of who replaces Whitman as EPA administrator, a change in direction is needed from the White House itself. What began with the Bush administration exercising its discretion over policy choices on global warming has devolved into attempts to suppress scientific information. These efforts jeopardize the credibility of federal agencies and the information they provide to Congress and the public.

The administration's commitment to protecting the environment has been an issue from the outset, when the Bush team made a number of policy decisions on global warming that matched those advocated by the coal and oil industries.

At EPA, where I was then serving as a climate policy adviser, we believed one of Whitman's first tasks would be to make good on the president's campaign promise to seek new laws to reduce pollution from power plants, the largest U.S. source of carbon dioxide emissions that trap heat in the atmosphere. But as soon as Whitman publicly reiterated the president's pledge in late February 2001, a debate ensued within the administration. White House aides drafted a six-page memorandum to John Bridgeland, who was then the president's deputy assistant for domestic policy. It listed the potential impacts on the coal industry, but devoted only six sentences to the science of global warming. Two weeks later, the president sent a letter to Congress announcing that he would no longer support new controls on global warming pollution from power plants. His letter left no room for compromise.

Whitman, who had argued throughout the brief but intense debate that the White House should at least leave its options open, had been publicly undermined. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell compared her to a "wind dummy," a military term for a dummy that is pushed out of an airplane to determine which way the wind is blowing. When Vice President Cheney noted that Whitman was being a "good soldier," the tone for the EPA's role in the administration was set.

Since U.S. power plants alone account for 10 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, the Bush administration next had to address the issue on the international stage. A State Department options paper

in March 2001 outlined potential next steps for dealing with our allies on the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that the president opposed. According to the paper, the United States could "repudiate the Kyoto negotiating process" altogether. Or, the administration could advance its own proposal in order to "give us time to develop a credible alternative approach to Kyoto, rather than simply blowing up the current negotiations." But the paper warned that leaving the door open to an alternative agreement "may not fully satisfy domestic groups that wish to drive the final stake in the heart of the Protocol." The United States subsequently walked away without offering an alternative.

With more than 80 percent of the nation's global warming pollution coming from the use of fossil fuels, the Bush energy plan dashed all hope for proposals to ease global warming. The plan, released in May 2001, made increased supplies of coal, oil and natural gas the priority in the coming decades.

In the few months that I worked under Whitman, I represented the EPA on the interagency working group that had been charged by Cheney with drafting the energy plan. Cheney's staff refereed the meetings, which were attended by representatives from other federal agencies and the White House. During the sessions I attended, the Energy Department continually pushed plans to increase coal and oil supplies while paying little heed to promoting energy efficiency and clean energy sources, options that could help meet the nation's growing energy needs without increasing pollution.

The issue of energy conservation came to a head at a Cabinet-level meeting hosted by Cheney on April 3, 2001. Whitman recommended that the government set a national goal for energy efficiency measured as a reduction in the nation's energy use relative to the size of the economy over the next two decades. People who attended the meeting told me later that Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham spoke against the proposal, noting that it would only invite unwelcome scrutiny of the energy plan's modest energy efficiency provisions. He prevailed.

Within a few months of taking office, the administration had hung a "do not disturb" sign on U.S. policy toward global warming. But the administration's position -- that new regulations would harm U.S. industry -- is not shared by most Americans, who are optimistic about the ability of businesses to innovate and adapt.

Concerned about public opinion, presidential counselor Karen Hughes called a White House communications strategy meeting on the environment in April 2001, declaring that green issues "are killing us," according to a Time magazine report. Having ruled out any significant policy change, however, the administration's only choice was damage control.

One example was its effort to raise doubts about the international scientific consensus that carbon dioxide pollution is causing global warming. In May 2001, the White House asked the National Research Council, part of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, for a second opinion. But the effort backfired. The council's report confirmed the scientific consensus that greenhouse gas emissions are major contributors to global warming,

Then a June 2002 report by the EPA and the State Department concluded that "continuing growth in greenhouse gas emissions is likely to lead to annual average warming over the United States that could be as much as several degrees Celsius (roughly 3 to 9 degrees Fahrenheit) during the 21st century." The report also detailed deleterious effects on public health and the environment in each region of the country, warning, for example, that "drought is likely to be more frequent and intense" in the Great Plains.

Pressed to respond, Bush dismissed the report as a product of "the bureaucracy," denigrating years of work by scientists throughout the federal government.

Afterward, the administration took a much bolder approach to dodge such embarrassment by trying to minimize awareness of the threat of global warming. In September 2002, it stripped a global warming section from an annual EPA report on trends in air pollution. An annual update had been included for years.

Most recently, internal EPA documents obtained by the National Wildlife Federation show that White House officials tried to force the EPA to alter the scientific content of a report in order to play down the risks of global warming. The EPA has billed the report, released in June, as "the first-ever national picture of environmental quality and human health in the United States." An internal EPA decision paper noted that White House officials were insisting on "major edits" to the climate change section and were telling the EPA that "no further changes may be made" beyond the White House edits. In the internal paper, EPA staff warned that the report "no longer accurately represents scientific consensus on climate change." The EPA ultimately pulled the global warming section from the report to avoid publishing information that is not scientifically credible.

Former EPA administrator Russell Train responded in a letter to the New York Times. "Having served as EPA administrator under both Presidents Nixon and Ford, I can state categorically that there never was such White House intrusion into the business of the EPA during my tenure," he wrote. "The EPA was established as an independent agency in the executive branch, and so it should remain. There appears today to be a steady erosion in its independent status."

Perhaps the most disturbing element of the leaked papers is that so far the White House has been unapologetic.

The leaked EPA memo provides only one glimpse into the administration's recent efforts to control information on global warming. The Washington Post reported this month that the EPA scrubbed its analysis of a congressional plan to require power plants to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other air pollutants. The EPA estimated the cost of the proposal, but withheld information that it would result in 17,800 fewer premature deaths every year than would the president's air pollution plan (dubbed "Clear Skies" by the administration's spin doctors). The EPA recently turned down Arizona Sen. John McCain's request for an analysis of a global warming plan that he and Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman intend to add to pending energy legislation, breaking the agency's long tradition of providing such assistance to

Congress.

The administration's conduct illustrates a broader pattern of managing information to fend off criticism on environmental initiatives such as weakening the Clean Air Act and lifting Clean Water Act protections for wetlands. For example, the administration postponed an analysis requested by an EPA advisory group reviewing toxic mercury emissions from power plants for fear it would discredit Bush's proposed changes in the Clean Air Act.

When President Reagan pursued a more overt agenda of undermining the EPA's ability to regulate industry, aggressive congressional oversight led to the resignation of the EPA head, Ann Gorsuch Burford. Despite the similarly far reaching impact of the current administration's proposed rollbacks in clean water and air protections, Congress has been largely held at bay by the White House's adept control of information.

Soon Bush will pick a new head for the EPA. In the confirmation hearings, it will be incumbent upon senators to demand accountability not just from the nominee, but from the White House itself.

Author's e-mail: symons@nwf.org

Jeremy Symons left the Environmental Protection Agency, where he was serving as climate policy adviser in the Office of Air and Radiation in April 2001. He currently manages the Climate Change & Wildlife program at the National Wildlife Federation.

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