Scientists copy data on climate in case it is lost under Trump

Sacramento Bee 12-14-16
BY BRADY DENNIS The Washington Post

Alarmed that decades of crucial climate measurements could vanish under a hostile Trump administration, scientists have begun a feverish attempt to copy reams of government data onto independent servers in hopes of safeguarding it from any political interference.

The efforts include a “guerrilla archiving event” in Toronto where experts will copy irreplaceable public data, meetings at the University of Pennsylvania focused on how to download as much federal data as possible in the coming weeks, and a collaboration of scientists and database experts who are compiling an online site to harbor scientific information.

“Something that seemed a little paranoid to me before all of a sudden seems potentially realistic, or at least something you’d want to hedge against,” said Nick Santos, an environmental researcher at the University of California, Davis, who over the weekend began copying government climate data onto a nongovernment server, where it will remain available to the public. “Doing this can only be a good thing. Hopefully they leave everything in place. But if not, we’re planning for that.”

In recent weeks, Trump has nominated Cabinet members who have questioned the scientific consensus around global warming. His transition team at the Department of Energy has asked agency officials for names of employees and contractors who have participated in international climate talks and worked on the scientific basis for Obama-era regulations of carbon emissions. One Trump adviser suggested that NASA no longer should conduct climate research and instead should focus on space exploration.

Those moves have stoked fears among the scientific community that Trump, who has called the notion of man-made climate change “a hoax” and vowed to reverse environmental policies put in place by President Barack Obama, could try to alter or dismantle parts of the government’s repository of data on everything from rising sea levels to the number of wildfires.

Michael Halpern, deputy director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the advocacy group Union of Concerned Scientists, argued that Trump has appointed a “band of climate conspiracy theorists” to run transition efforts at various agencies, along with nominees to lead them who share similar views.

“They have been salivating at the possibility of dismantling federal climate research programs for years. It’s not unreasonable to think they would want to take down the very data that they dispute,” Halpern said in an email.

Neither Trump nor his transition team has said that the new administration plans to manipulate or curtail data. The transition team did not respond to a request for comment. But some scientists aren’t taking chances.

“What are the most important .gov climate assets?” Eric Holthaus, a meteorologist and self-proclaimed “climate hawk,” tweeted from his Arizona home Saturday evening. “Scientists: Do you have a US .gov climate database that you don’t want to see disappear?”

Within hours, responses flooded in from around the country. Scientists added links to dozens of government databases to a Google spreadsheet. Investors offered to help fund efforts to copy and safeguard key climate data. Lawyers offered pro bono legal help. Database experts offered help organizing mountains of data and free server space to house it. In California, Santos began building an online repository to “make sure these data sets remain freely and broadly accessible.”
Climate data from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association have been politically vulnerable. When Tom Karl, director of the National Centers for Environmental Information, and his colleagues published a study in 2015 seeking to challenge the idea that there had been a global warming “slowdown” or “pause” during the 2000s, they relied, in significant part, on updates to NOAA’s ocean temperature data set, saying the data “do not support the notion of a global warming ‘hiatus.’”

In response, the U.S. House Science Committee chair, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, tried to subpoena the scientists and their records.

The effort launched by Holthaus is one of several underway to preserve key federal scientific data.