Trump team seeks names of federal workers who work on climate change

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BY STEVEN MUFSON AND JULIET EILPERIN The Washington Post

The Trump transition team has issued a list of 74 questions for the Energy Department, asking officials there to identify which department employees and contractors have worked on forging an international climate pact as well as domestic efforts to cut the nation’s carbon output.

The questionnaire requests a list of those individuals who have taken part in international climate talks over the past five years and “which programs within DOE are essential to meeting the goals of President Barack Obama’s Climate Action Plan.”

The questionnaire, which one Energy Department official described as unusually intrusive and a matter for departmental lawyers, has raised concern that the Trump transition team was trying to figure out how to target the people, including civil servants, who have helped implement policies under Obama.

The questionnaire was first reported by Bloomberg News. The Washington Post obtained its own copy of the document as well as confirmation from other people in the department.

The memo provides the clearest indication yet of how Trump’s administration would begin to dismantle specific aspects of Obama’s ambitious climate policies. Thousands of scientists have already signed petitions calling on the president-elect and his team to respect scientific integrity and refrain from singling out individual researchers whose work might conflict with the new administration’s policy goals.

This potential clash could prompt a major schism within the federal government, with many career
officials waging a battle against incoming political appointees.

One question zeroed in on the issue of the “social cost of carbon,” a way of calculating the consequences of greenhouse gas emissions. The transition team asked for a list of department employees or contractors who attended interagency meetings, the dates of the meetings, and emails and other materials associated with them.

The social cost of carbon is a metric that calculates the cost to society of emitting a ton of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. The Obama administration has used this tool to try to calculate the benefits of regulations and initiatives that lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Another question appeared to delve deeply into the mechanisms behind scientific tools called “integrated assessment models,” which scientists use to forecast future changes to the climate and energy system. It also asked what the Energy Department considers to be “the proper equilibrium climate sensitivity,” which is a way that climate researchers calculate how much the planet will eventually warm, depending upon the amount of greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere. “My guess is that they’re trying to undermine the credibility of the science that DOE has produced, particularly in the field of climate science,” said Rob Jackson, a Stanford climate and energy researcher, in response to the question about the Integrated Assessment Models.

The questionnaire also appeared to take aim at the national laboratories, which operate with a high degree of independence but which are part of the Energy Department. The questionnaire asked for a list of the top 20 salaried employees of the labs, the labs’ peer-reviewed publications over the past three years, a list of their professional society memberships, affiliations, and the websites they maintain or contribute to “during work hours.”

The transition team list also asked how to keep open aging nuclear power plants, restart the controversial Yucca mountain nuclear waste site shelved by President Obama and support the licensing of small modular reactors.

It included 15 questions for the Energy Information Administration, some of them routine but some questioning the way the agency uses data about energy production.

The questions called to mind past cases of conflicts between Republican administrations and federal agency scientists on the environment and other matters.

In Ronald Reagan’s first term, Anne Gorsuch was appointed to head the Environmental Protection Agency amid a major push for regulatory rollback. But after Gorsuch resigned amid controversy in 1983, Congress opened investigations into supposed “hit lists” at the agency used to track the views of members of scientific advisory boards, according to contemporary press reports.

During the George W. Bush administration, meanwhile, there were complaints that scientific documents had been edited to raise doubts about the science of climate change and that researchers had been prevented from speaking openly to the media and sharing their expertise.

Energy Department officials have not yet decided how to respond to the questions targeting the agency’s climate activities, according to federal officials who asked not to be identified to discuss internal deliberations.

“With some of these questions, it feels more like an inquisition than a question, in terms of going after career employees who have been here through Bush years to Clinton, and up to now,” said one
current Energy Department employee. “All of a sudden you have questions that feel more like a congressional investigation than an actual probing of how the Department of Energy does its job.” Michael Halpern, deputy director of the Union of Concerned Scientists’ Center for Science and Democracy, called the memo’s demand that Energy officials identify specific employees “alarming.” “If the Trump administration is already singling out scientists for doing their jobs, the scientific community is right to be worried about what his administration will do in office. What’s next? Trump administration officials holding up lists of ‘known climatologists’ and urging the public to go after them?” Halpern asked.

He added that lawmakers have attacked executive branch scientists in the past for doing “work they find inconvenient. It seems that they are about to get accomplices in the Department of Energy. But don’t expect the federal workforce to simply roll over. The new administration will find thousands of federal workers who still believe in their departmental mission and will work hard to resist attacks on their peers. Scientists outside government are standing by to expose these actions and fight back.”

The questionnaire spanned a broad area of Energy Department activities, including its loan program, its technology research program, responses to Congress, estimates of offshore wind, and cleanup of uranium at a site once used by the military for weapons research.

The Trump transition team meetings with Energy Department officials so far have excluded political appointees, one current official said.

At the Defense Department, Trump transition personnel are having multiple meetings a day with Pentagon personnel, but in some cases have asked Obama administration political appointees not to attend those meetings, officials there said.