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White House prepares to scrutinize intelligence agencies' finding that climate change threatens national security

By [Juliet Eilperin](#) and[Missy Ryan](#)

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The White House is working to assemble a panel to assess whether climate change poses a national security threat, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post, a conclusion that federal intelligence agencies have affirmed several times since President Trump took office.

The proposed Presidential Committee on Climate Security, which would be established by executive order, is being spearheaded by [William Happer](#), a National Security Council senior director.

Happer, an emeritus professor of physics at Princeton University, has said that carbon emissions linked to climate change should be viewed as an asset rather than a pollutant.

The initiative represents the Trump administration's most recent attempt to question the findings of federal scientists and experts on climate change and comes less than three weeks after Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats delivered a worldwide threat assessment that identified it as a significant security risk.

In late November, Trump [dismissed a government report](#) finding that global warming is intensifying and poses a major threat the U.S. economy, saying, "I don't see it." Last month, his nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency, acting administrator

Andrew Wheeler, testified that he did not see climate change as one of the world's pressing challenges.

According to the NSC discussion paper, the order would create a federal advisory committee "to advise the President on scientific understanding of today's climate, how the climate might change in the future under natural and human influences, and how a changing climate could affect the security of the United States."

The document notes that the government has issued several major reports under Trump identifying climate change as a serious threat. "However, these scientific and national security judgments have not undergone a rigorous independent and adversarial scientific peer review to examine the certainties and uncertainties of climate science, as well as implications for national security," it said.

Francesco Femia, chief executive officer of the Council on Strategic Risks and co-founder of the Center for Climate and Security, said in an interview that the plan appeared to be an effort to undermine the existing consensus within the national intelligence community that climate change needs to be addressed to avert serious consequences in the future.

"This is the equivalent of setting up a committee on nuclear weapons proliferation and having someone lead it who doesn't think nuclear weapons exist," he said. "It's honestly a blunt force political tool designed to shut the national security community up on climate change."

It is unclear how much support Happer's initiative has inside the administration: Deputies from more than a dozen agencies have been invited to attend a meeting on the topic on Friday in the White House Situation Room.

Several agencies declined to comment on the matter this week, including the NSC, the Pentagon, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Happer, who worked at the Energy Department under George H.W. Bush and joined the White House in September to work on “emerging technologies,” is not formally trained as a climate scientist. He developed a national reputation for his work on laser technology used in missile defense and on the interactions between light and atoms.

He has sat on the boards of two advocacy groups that have questioned whether global warming poses a serious risk, the CO₂ Coalition and the George C. Marshall Institute. Last March, when asked in connection with court proceedings whether he had received money from the fossil fuel industry, Happer said he had been given somewhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000 from Peabody Coal to testify before a Minnesota Public Utilities Commission hearing.

During a December 2016 energy and climate policy summit sponsored by the conservative Heritage Foundation, Happer [explained](#) that the CO₂ Coalition aimed to counter the idea that carbon dioxide is a pollutant because it is the primary driver of recent climate change.

“I like to call this the CO₂ anti-defamation league,” he said, gesturing to a slide, “because there is the CO₂ molecule, and it has undergone decade after decade of abuse, for no reason.

“We’re doing our best to try and counter this myth that CO₂ is a dangerous pollutant,” he said. “It’s not a pollutant at all. . . . We

should be telling the scientific truth, that more CO₂ is actually a benefit to the earth.”

Most scientists have taken a different view, concluding that the world must curb its carbon output in the next few decades or risk dire consequences. Global temperatures have risen roughly 1 degree Celsius, or 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit, compared to preindustrial levels. A [U.N. report issued in October](#) said the world has to cut its emissions by more than 1 billion tons each year over the next decade to keep the rise from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The Trump administration, however, has accelerated domestic fossil fuel production and sought to reverse most of the curbs on greenhouse gas emissions adopted under President Barack Obama. Last year the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration published an analysis predicting that [global temperature rise could reach 4 degrees Celsius](#), or 7 degrees Fahrenheit, under the government's current trajectory.


While several Trump appointees have argued that climate change does not pose a significant risk to the nation's defense capabilities, the Pentagon and intelligence agencies have reached the opposite conclusion.

The [assessment](#) Coats submitted on Jan. 29 to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, for example, states, “Global environmental and ecological degradation, as well as climate change, are likely to fuel competition for resources, economic distress, and social discontent through 2019 and beyond.

The Defense Department said in a report [submitted to Congress](#) in mid-January that several dozen military installations around the nation are experiencing climate impacts. The assessment, which

called climate change “a national security issue,” said rising seas, wildfires and other such disasters are likely to create more severe problems for the military in the coming years.

Juliet Eilperin

Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books — one on sharks and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other — and has worked for The Post since 1998. [Follow](#) 

Missy Ryan

Missy Ryan writes about the Pentagon, military issues and national security for The Washington Post. She joined The Post in 2014 from Reuters, where she reported on U.S. national security and foreign policy issues. She has reported from Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mexico, Peru, Argentina and Chile. [Follow](#) 