

White House Tried to Stop Climate Science Testimony, Documents Show



By Lisa Friedman

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WASHINGTON — The White House tried to stop a State Department senior intelligence analyst from discussing climate science in congressional testimony this week, internal emails and documents show.

The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research declined to make changes to the proposed testimony and the analyst, Rod Schoonover, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, was ultimately allowed to speak before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence on Wednesday.

But in a highly unusual move, the White House refused to approve Dr. Schoonover's written testimony for entry into the permanent Congressional Record. The reasoning, according to a June 4 email seen by The New York Times, was that the science did not match the Trump administration's views.

[Update, July 10: State Dept. Intelligence Analyst Quits to Protest Blocked House Testimony | From the Opinion Section, July 30: The White House Blocked My Report on Climate Change and National Security]

Norman J. Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative policy group, said that it was common for the White House to vet agency testimony to Congress to ensure it did not contradict administration policy.

But, he said, "I have never heard of basic facts being deleted from or blocked from testimony." Mr. Ornstein said withholding the analyst's written testimony was significant. A verbal presentation could be interpreted as an individual's position, he said, but "the written testimony is a more formal expression of a department."

A White House spokesman said the administration did not comment on internal policy reviews. The National Security Council did not respond to requests for comment, and a spokesman for the State Department referred questions to the White House.

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The Washington Post first reported the effort to suppress Dr. Schoonover's testimony.

"The testimony still has serious concerns with internal components and focuses heavily on the science," Daniel Q. Greenwood, deputy assistant to the president in the White House office of legislative affairs, wrote in an email. "Because it doesn't reflect the coordinated IC position, or the administration's position, there is no way this can be cleared ahead of the hearing," he wrote, using government shorthand for the intelligence community.

On almost every page of Dr. Schoonover's testimony, the National Security Council offered comments and criticisms, according to a document that tracks changes. Two people familiar with the document said the notes were from William Happer, a physicist and White House adviser on the council who denies the established scientific consensus on global warming.

"This is not objective testimony at all," one comment read. "It includes lots of climate alarm propaganda that is not science at all. I am embarrassed to have this go out on behalf of the executive branch of the Federal Government."

Another comment objects to the phrase "tipping point" to describe when the planet reaches a threshold of irreversible climate change. "'Tipping points' is a propaganda slogan for the scientifically illiterate," the comment reads. "They were a favorite of Al Gore's science adviser, James Hansen."

Dr. Schoonover's testimony noted that his analysis drew from peer-reviewed scientific journals and work produced by top United States government scientists. That, too, came under attack from the National Security Council, which said that "a consensus of peer reviewed literature has nothing to do with the truth."

But the heaviest proposed edits, and the basis for ultimately blocking the written testimony, came from the White House Office of Legislative Affairs. That office, according to the document, recommended eliminating five pages of science that appeared under the headings "Scientific Baseline" and "Stresses to Human and Societal Systems."

Those pages laid the scientific foundation for the rest of Dr. Schoonover's testimony, which described the various national security threats linked to climate change, like instability from water shortages in some parts of the world.

The science portion offered factual assertions like, "The Earth's climate is unequivocally undergoing a long-term warming trend as established by decades of scientific measurements from multiple, independent lines of evidence." It also noted that the past five years had been the warmest five on record.

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Correction: June 8, 2019

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a science adviser to former Vice President Al Gore. He is James Hansen, not Hanson.

Lisa Friedman reports on climate and environmental policy in Washington. A former editor at Climatewire, she has covered nine international climate talks.
@LFFriedman

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