

Trump nominees talk science: As it happened

President-elect's picks to lead environment and health agencies testify before Congress.

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As Oklahoma's attorney general, Scott Pruitt has challenged the federal government's climate policies.

On 18 January, four of US president-elect Donald Trump's picks for key government positions had confirmation hearings in the US Senate. Lawmakers had a chance to question [the nominees](#), who must be confirmed by the Senate before they can take office. Nature covered the proceedings as they happen.

UN: Cholera in Haiti

Senator Edward Markey (Democrat, Massachusetts) says that UN peacekeepers from Nepal introduced cholera to Haiti in 2010, causing around 8,000 deaths thus far. And yet, he says, the UN has not committed to cleaning up the sanitation system in the country so that cholera outbreaks will not re-emerge every time there's a hurricane.

"Countries need to take action against violators who harm the people they are supposed to protect," responds Haley. "Those countries need to be held accountable."

UN: Iran nuclear deal

Senator Tim Kaine (Democrat, Virginia) asked Haley whether she might unilaterally back out of the Iran nuclear deal. The deal, [signed by six countries July 2015](#), eased sanctions on Iran that had negative unintended consequences for scientists in that country at large.

Haley said that for now, she'd like to check to ensure that Iran is in compliance with the agreement — and if it is not, to act on those violations. She includes a note of disapproval for the deal, however. "We gave a state sponsor of terrorism a pass," she says, "And we gave them billions of dollars to do it."

EPA: 'Some' human contribution to climate change

Shortly before the Pruitt hearing adjourned for a brief recess, Senator Bernie Sanders — the Vermont Democrat who lost the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination to Hillary Clinton — argued that Pruitt's nomination is "designed to protect the fossil fuel industry, not the environment".

When Sanders asked Pruitt about his views on global warming, Pruitt said he believes humans are contributing to global warming “in some manner”.

Sanders then asked the nominee whether he believes that humans must reduce emissions in order to address global warming. “My personal opinion is immaterial,” Pruitt said, noting that the EPA administrator’s job is to enforce environmental laws. Pressed again, Pruitt said that the “EPA has a very important role in regulating the emissions of CO₂”.

HHS: Mission creep at the FDA?

Roberts, who chairs the Senate’s agriculture committee, asked Price what he would do about what he sees as mission creep by the US Food and Drug Administration.

“I’m concerned that the [Obama] administration did not prioritize FDA’s mission to protect the nation’s food supply,” Roberts said, instead focusing on regulating nutrition. Roberts authored a 2016 bill that would have banned states from requiring the labelling of genetically modified organisms.

“If I’m confirmed, I would work specifically with the FDA commissioner to make sure we are relying on science, that science is driving the decisions we’re making and that transparency makes it available,” Price said.

EPA: States' rights

One theme that Republican senators have returned to again and again during today’s hearing for Pruitt is the role of the states in implementing federal environmental laws — and the general feeling that EPA has been too aggressive in its enforcement.

Senator Dan Sullivan (Republican, Alaska) noted that 32 states — most with Republican majorities, in the US interior — have challenged a federal rule intended to expand protections under the Clean Water Act.

“The states are not mere vessels of the federal government,” Pruitt said in response. Environmental laws passed by Congress establish a specific role for states, he added. “That needs to be respected.”

HHS: NIH funding, and more on climate science

Senator Susan Collins (Republican, Maine), asked Price whether he would support funding increases for the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Price says that he does support that. “NIH is a treasure for our country and the kinds of things we should be doing to find cures,” he says. “One of the core avenues to make those is through NIH.”

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (Democrat, Rhode Island), challenged Price on a 2010 comment that there were “many recent revelations of errors and obfuscation in the allegedly ‘settled science’ of global warming”.

“It appears to every science organization in the country — all the legitimate major ones and to every American university — that this actually is pretty darn settled science, and the only people who oppose it have vast financial interests,” Whitehouse said. “In making these statements you have taken the side of special interests. If we can’t trust you on the science as settled as climate science, how can we trust you on public health issues where there are financial interests on the other side?”

Price dodged the science question. “The climate is obviously changing, continuously changing. The question from the science standpoint is what impact does human behaviour have on that and how to mitigate it. That needs study.”

UN: Questions about US financial support

Several senators have mentioned worries that president-elect Trump will cut US funding for the United Nations. “He has allowed the perception that the United States will no longer take a leadership role,” said Senator Tom Udall (Democrat, New Mexico). “That he would cut off funding and end our participation in important aspects of the UN. US leadership is paramount. If we left, it will be filled by countries that might not fill our interest like Russia and china.”

Udall said that he is pleased by Haley’s remarks today about maintaining a strong relationship with the UN.

Senator Christopher Murphy (Democrat, Connecticut) also addressed the funding issue. “The risk of pulling funding because the US

doesn't get its way is catastrophic," he says, noting the UN's role in vaccinating children and providing maternal healthcare.

Haley shot down the notion of cutting US financial support. "I have never suggested we should pull funding," she said. "I do not think we need to pull money from the UN, I do not believe in slash and burn."

Rather, she said, if she did not like a particular UN action she would discuss the matter with Trump before moving forward. As for Trump's threats suggesting that he might defund or step away from the UN, she said, "I know he has made comments about the UN but those are not things I would believe in."

UN: US role in Paris climate pact

Senator Tom Udall (Democrat, New Mexico) asked Haley if she agrees that the United States must remain a part of [the Paris climate agreement](#). Haley said that the "climate change will always be on the table for me".

Haley continued: "When we look at that Paris agreement, we should do what is right, but not at the peril of our industries."

EPA: Climate-change hoax?

Senator Ed Markey (Democrat, Massachusetts) quoted [president-elect Donald Trump calling global warming a "hoax" perpetrated by China](#), then asked Pruitt if he agrees. "I do not," Pruitt said. Markey then asked Pruitt if Trump is wrong, but Pruitt dodged the question. "I do not believe that climate change is a hoax," he said.

In the past, Pruitt has been decidedly less definitive about his position on the both the science and the mainstream scientific consensus. "Scientists continue to disagree about the degree and extent of global warming and its connection to the actions of mankind," Pruitt wrote last May in a guest editorial in the *National Review*, co-authored with Alabama attorney general Luther Strange. "That debate should be encouraged."

Pruitt's hearing comes on the same day that the World Meteorological Organization, NASA and NOAA have each announced that 2016 was the hottest year since record-keeping began in the 1880s. (The previous record-holder was 2015.)

NOAA: Balancing budgets, plus more on scientific integrity

Senator Brian Schatz (Democrat, Hawaii) asked Ross how he would balance various financial demands within NOAA, such as the competing needs of maintaining coastal research vessels against building in the much more expensive satellite programme.

"As someone who has operated vessels I'm well aware that old vessels are quite inefficient to operate," Ross said. He noted it would be up to appropriators to decide how much money to allocate to NOAA overall, but pledged to find ways to deal with "these very pressing capital expenditure needs".

Schatz also followed up on the question about scientific integrity at NOAA, asking the nominee whether he would support the agency's 2011 scientific integrity policy.

"As I've said, I believe that science is science and scientists should perform science," Ross said. "I haven't studied the intricate details, frankly, of that document, so I can't make a formal commitment to it. But as to the general concepts of scientists doing the science, I'm totally in support of that."

HHS: Unclogging the drug pipeline

Senator Pat Roberts (Republican, Kansas) asked Price what he would do to improve the pipeline for innovative therapies developed in the United States.

Price mentioned the Orphan Drug Act, a 1983 law intended to create more therapies for rare, neglected diseases by offering companies incentives such as market exclusivity, tax credits, and lowered liability in clinical trials. The law, Price says, "made the US the leader for rare disease", and suggested that innovation could be further increased by following this model.

The number of orphan drug approvals [has indeed skyrocketed in recent years](#), in part because of incentives but also because blockbuster drugs for common diseases (such as heart disease) are becoming more difficult to find. The rise of precision medicine and easier genome sequencing has also made it easier to identify the cause of a patient's particular rare condition and develop a drug for

it.

But the cost of these drugs has also skyrocketed. And some drug approvals, such as a recent decision to [greenlight a drug called eteplirsen to treat Duchenne muscular dystrophy](#), have proven controversial. Eteplirsen, made by Sarepta Therapeutics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was approved using data from a 12-patient trial that demonstrated small increases in levels of a key protein rather than changes in symptoms or disease progression.

EPA: Energy ties questioned

The Pruitt hearing has now settled into a predictable pattern. Democrats use the bulk of their allotted time to attack Pruitt, leaving him little opportunity to respond. Republican senators then step in and offer a bit of their time so that Pruitt can address the Democrats' accusations. Republicans — who thus far have been supportive of Pruitt — then switch to a more gentle line of questioning.

Moments ago, this pattern played out with regard to a letter that Pruitt sent to the EPA in 2011 challenging the agency's estimates of methane emissions from natural-gas wells. As first reported by the *New York Times* last year, that letter was a near-verbatim copy of a letter provided by Devon Energy, an oil and gas company based in Oklahoma.

Democrats accused Pruitt of using his office to advance Devon Energy's interests, but Pruitt hardly had time to defend himself. After Republicans stepped in, Pruitt maintained that he was representing the interests of an industry that is important to Oklahoma — and thus its people.

"The letter that was sent to EPA was not sent on behalf of any one company," Pruitt said. "It was the position of the state."

UN: Maternal health and birth control

Senator Jeanne Shaheen (Democrat, New Hampshire) told Haley that 60% of maternal deaths take place in humanitarian settings, such as those affected by conflict. Many of those deaths could be prevented by expanding access to birth control, among other efforts, the senator said — noting the key role that the UN Population Fund plays in improving reproductive healthcare.

"I will support any efforts to help educate, plan and let them know what contraceptives are in place," Haley said. "I am strongly pro life so anything we can do to prevent abortions I support."

(Shaheen's figures may be slightly out of date: physician and epidemiologist Hans Rosling has concluded that [no more than 17% of maternal deaths](#) take place in settings of conflict, displacement and natural disaster.)

UN: Philippines killings and HIV

Senator Ben Cardin (Democrat, Maryland) asked Haley how she would respond to the decision by Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte to sanction the murder of suspected drug abusers — a measure that he's said can combat the country's HIV crisis.

Haley said that if she is confirmed as US ambassador to the UN, she would speak up against the killings: "We have always been the moral compass of the world and we need to speak up on that."

EPA: Conflict of interest?

Democrats also pressed Pruitt on his role in an organization called the Rule of Law Defense Fund, which they said receives funding from the energy industry and advocates against climate regulations. Pruitt said he is an officer of the organization and has attended fundraisers, but he denied accusations that this represents a conflict of interest.

EPA: Mercury emissions rule

Democrats launched an early attack on Pruitt, focusing on the lawsuits that he participated in as Oklahoma attorney general challenging the EPA's efforts to curb mercury emissions from power plants. A Democratic senator cited statements by Pruitt that seemed to downplay the danger of mercury pollution, but Pruitt said those lawsuits were intended to challenge the regulatory process — particularly the agency's estimates of the costs and benefits of the rules.

"I believe that mercury should be regulated," Pruitt said. "There was no argument that we made that mercury was not a hazardous pollutant."

NOAA: Scientific integrity

Nelson asked whether Ross would support [NOAA's scientific integrity policy](#), which lays out how agency scientists can clearly communicate scientific results without political interference. "I support the dissemination of valid information to the public," Ross said. "I have great respect for the scientific quality of NOAA."

Nelson countered by asking whether Ross would consider data on sea level rise to be valid scientific data. "It's very hard for me to parse which part of data is what," Ross responded. He noted that NOAA would shortly release a big report updating its latest climate findings. "It will be very, very interesting to see what their updated findings are on that topic [sea level rise] as well as other topics," Ross said. "I'm sure they are mindful of the facts."

EPA: A regulator's role

In his opening statement, Scott Pruitt — Trump's pick to lead the US Environmental Protection Agency, and Oklahoma's attorney-general — said that he would listen to state regulators, the public and Congress as he enforces federal environmental laws and regulations. He said he rejects the narrative that to be pro-energy is to be anti-environment, and vice versa. He promised predictability: "Regulators are supposed to make things regular."

And although Pruitt has [questioned the science underlying climate change in the past](#), he took a softer position today. "Science tells us the climate is changing," and that humans are contributing to that phenomenon, Pruitt said. But the ability to measure that change and what to do about it "are subject to continued debate and dialogue".

NOAA: Climate change hits home

Wilbur Ross, a billionaire businessman from Florida, is Trump's nominee to lead the Department of Commerce. The department, which oversees issues such as trade policy, also includes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Senator Bill Nelson (Democrat, Florida) opened the confirmation hearing by citing data from NOAA and NASA satellites on rising sea levels in Florida. He called on Ross, as a resident of the state, to accept the scientific consensus on climate change.

Ross noted that he and his wife live on the water and as such, "weather sensitivity comes to you naturally". He referred to [the recent launch of the GOES-R satellite](#), the first of a next generation of weather satellites from NOAA, as closing a gap in forecasting abilities between the US and Europe and Japan. "As far as I can tell the new sensing devices will bring us up to equal, and probably ahead of, the others," he said.

Ross also said that he had been getting up to speed on the importance of the nation's fisheries, which are overseen by NOAA. "I don't think I understood how an intricate an industry that is," he said. "Given the enormity of our coastlines and our freshwater, I would like to try to figure out how we can become much more self-sufficient in fishing and perhaps even a net exporter," he said.



Andrew Harnett/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Representative Tom Price is nominated to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

And we're off ...

The nominees under consideration today include:

- **Oklahoma attorney general Scott Pruitt**, Trump's choice to direct the US Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt is one of dozens of state officials [who have mounted a legal challenge to President Barack Obama's limits on greenhouse-gas emissions](#) from power plants — regulations that Trump has promised to repeal. He will testify before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.
- **Representative Tom Price (Republican, Georgia)**, who is nominated to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, which includes the National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration. [Price has taken a hard line on spending during his years in Congress](#), and opposes research with embryonic stem cells. He will testify before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.
- **Billionaire investor Wilbur Ross**, Trump's pick to lead the Department of Commerce, which includes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA — [which monitors US weather, studies climate change and manages fisheries](#) — accounts for US\$5.9-billion of the commerce department's \$9.7-billion budget for 2017. Ross will testify before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.
- **South Carolina governor Nikki Haley**, who is nominated to become the next US ambassador to the United Nations. Trump has pledged to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement negotiated under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Haley will testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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