

US energy agency asked scientists to scrub references to climate change

Researchers were told to censor descriptions of projects funded by a Department of Energy laboratory.

Jeff Tollefson & Amy Maxmen

25 August 2017 Corrected: 27 August 2017 Clarified: 29 August 2017

Multiple researchers who received grants from the US Department of Energy (DOE) say that they have been asked to remove references to “climate change” and “global warming” from the descriptions of their projects, they say.

In one case, a lab official at the DOE’s Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) in Richland, Washington, asked an ecologist to elide references to climate change from her grant proposal to satisfy US President Donald Trump’s budget language restrictions. The scientist, Jennifer Bowen of Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, posted an e-mail from the lab official to Facebook on 24 August.

“I have been asked to contact you to update the wording in your proposal abstract to remove words such as ‘global warming’ or ‘climate change’,” wrote the official, project coordinator Ashley Gilbert of the PNNL’s Environmental Molecular Sciences Laboratory (EMSL). Bowen’s project will examine how environmental stressors, such as climate change, affect the ecology of saltwater marshes.

Gilbert’s office told *Nature* that she was unavailable for comment, and a PNNL spokesperson referred questions to DOE headquarters in Washington DC. Department spokeswoman Shaylyn Hynes declined to answer questions about the situation, but said that “there is no departmental-wide policy banning the term ‘climate change’ from being used in DOE materials”.

Related stories

- US science envoy resigns in protest at Trump policies
- US government disbands climate-science advisory committee

Related stories

- US science envoy resigns in protest at Trump policies
- US government disbands climate-science advisory committee

Bowen could not be reached for comment on the matter. But Jonathan Sanderman, a biogeochemist at the Woods Hole Research Center in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and co-principal

- Fears rise for US climate report as Trump officials take reins

More related stories

- Fears rise for US climate report as Trump officials take reins

More related stories

investigator on the marsh project, confirmed that the e-mail came from Gilbert. Sanderman speculates that PNNL officials “are worried the grant will get zeroed out if someone sees that it lists climate change”.

Not the only one

Bowen and Sanderman’s project is among 14 that were announced on 23 August as winners of research grants from the EMSL and the Joint Genome Institute, which is managed by the DOE’s Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California.

Another grant winner from that group, ecologist Scott Saleska of the University of Arizona in Tucson, confirmed that he, too, had received a request from a DOE official on 24 August to remove references to climate change from his project’s description. Saleska’s study focuses on the effects of decomposing plant material on permafrost, and his team’s abstract highlighted the implications of this process for climate change.

The White House’s 2018 budget proposal for the DOE Office of Science proposes scaling back or eliminating support for many climate-research programmes and research areas, such as climate feedbacks. But the document also emphasizes the need to study how carbon cycles through ecosystems — a category that encompasses Bowen’s, Sanderman’s and Saleska’s projects.

Saleska says it appears that DOE programme managers are being careful to make it clear that they are, in fact, following the president’s budget directive. “What else can they do?” he asks. Saleska says that he is more concerned that research priorities are being set by political ideology that is at odds with scientific knowledge.

Sanderman also lamented the fact that scientists are being forced to change the way they talk about their work. “But if that’s what it takes to keep science going for a couple of years, we will I guess play along,” he adds.

Corrections & Clarifications

Corrected:

A previous version of the story stated that Sanderman said PNNL officials were worried about the grant. In fact, he does not know their intention. This was speculation.

Clarified: The story has been updated to clarify what Scott Saleska told Nature about the actions by DOE programme managers.