

Climate censorship gains steam in red states

April 17 2015, by Katherine Bagley, InsideClimate News

While plenty of people found humor in the recent news that officials in Florida and Wisconsin are censoring state workers' ability to talk about, much less work on, climate change, other states are not necessarily laughing. In fact, several political and environmental experts told InsideClimate News they could use it as a model to imitate.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott became the leader of this potential trend last month when news emerged that he had ordered environmental staffers not to use the terms "climate change" or "global warming" in communications or reports. Wisconsin established a similar policy this month, voting to ban staffers who manage thousands of acres of forests from working on or talking about global warming.

Experts now say that conservative lawmakers and public officials were far from embarrassed by the censorship revelations; they were emboldened by them. It could lead to a bevy of Republican lawmakers enacting similar policies in other states.

"It seems like they are dusting off a playbook from the Bush administration years," a period when federal officials removed or downplayed climate change research from government reports, said RL Miller, founder of Climate Hawks Vote, a super PAC that works to elect climate-conscious candidates. "I wouldn't be surprised if other deep red states follow suit."

In states with substantial conservative bases, shutting down climate action through things like censorship has become a "risk-less position for

a local Republican official to take," said Walter Rosenbaum, an expert in environmental and energy policy at the University of Florida. If more leaders follow Wisconsin and Florida's lead, it "will suffocate a lot of needed public discussion on the seriousness of this issue," he said.

While the number of Americans' who accept human-driven climate change has gradually increased in recent years, the issue is still a politically polarizing one. The ideological divide is partly driven by conservatives' mistrust of science and their belief that climate action requires big-government policies. Republican lawmakers can often score big points in their districts if they hinder what has become labeled a liberal priority, experts said.

While Wisconsin and Florida are the first states to outright ban their employees from working on climate change, at least publicly, Republican legislators have long tampered with how governments address global warming. In the early 2000s, White House official Philip Cooney removed or altered climate research findings in several federal reports. In 2012, North Carolina legislators voted that sea level rise predictions be ignored for planning purposes and Virginia lawmakers voted to only approve a study of risks to the state's coastline if it didn't deal with climate change.

"This is a situation that George Orwell would have recognized," said Michael Gerrard, director of Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, referring to the author of the dystopian novel 1984. "It is very worrying that we are seeing public entities telling their employees to act like ostriches, to put their heads in the sand. Society thrives through innovation and insight, not willful blindness."

The Wisconsin policy centers around the Board of Commissioners on Public Lands, which manages money from the sale of millions of acres of property over the last century to fund education initiatives. It also

manages timber production on more than 70,000 acres.

The policy came at the request of new Wisconsin State Treasurer Matt Adamczyk, a Republican who sits on a three-panel board overseeing the agency. Since taking office, Adamczyk has "targeted" Tia Nelson, the group's executive secretary who is also the daughter of former U.S. Sen. and founder of Earth Day Gaylord Nelson, said Wisconsin Secretary of State Doug La Follette, who also sits on the advisory board.

Adamczyk disapproved that Nelson sat on a global warming task force back in 2007 and 2008 at the behest of Democratic then-Gov. Jim Doyle, calling it a "waste of time," in a board meeting March 17.

On April 7, Adamczyk and Attorney General Brad Schimel, a Republican who also oversees the agency, voted 2-1 to ban staffers of the public land board from working on climate change, or even responding to emails about it.

"To tell the staff of the board that manages more than 70,000 acres of timber that we should not communicate with other foresters and scientists on an issue they are very concerned about is ridiculous," said La Follette.

The board currently earns about \$250,000 from its timber production every year, La Follette said. In total, it loans and gives out approximately \$35 million every year to schools and libraries.

Adamczyk did not respond to InsideClimate News' request for comment.

The censorship in Wisconsin and Florida comes at a time when the Republican Party might be forced to evolve in its position on climate change. Political experts said there is growing awareness that winning the White House in 2016 will be difficult for Republicans without the

support of younger voters, the vast majority of whom see [climate change](#) as a significant threat.

One Republican, former Congressman Bob Inglis of South Carolina, who directs the Energy and Enterprise Initiative at George Mason University, recently wrote an op-ed in the Charlotte Observer that said he believed conservatives were beginning to come around on the subject. Many Republican leaders have shifted their stances slightly in recent years, from outright denial to instead sidestepping the subject by saying things like, "I'm not a scientist."

Even so, the GOP still has a long way to go before it can be seen as a pro-climate action party - and efforts to censor government employees on [global warming](#) won't help, Inglis told InsideClimate News.

"If they think these are victories, they are very temporary victories," he said. "In Florida, the facts on the coast will disprove that."

©2015 InsideClimate News

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC

Citation: Climate censorship gains steam in red states (2015, April 17) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-climate-censorship-gains-steam-red.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--