

Trump info shutdowns at US science agencies, especially EPA

January 30 2017, by Tabitha M. Powledge



The big storm that crossed North America on Jan. 15, photographed by NOAA's new geostationary weather satellite.

By now it should have been possible to get away from our new presidency here at On Science Blogs. January 2017 is ending and the

Year of the Rooster, [bringer of light](#), is upon us. But stuff—bad stuff, often worse stuff—keeps happening to science and medicine.

the gag reflex

Bad Astronomer Phil Plait is gagging at the [gag orders](#) suddenly clamped on government [science](#), and he is far from alone. He is talking particularly about Environmental Protection Agency staff and scientists at the Agricultural Research Service. But Official Silence has been imposed at other [government agencies](#) too.

No press releases. No blog posts. No tweets. Speculation that researchers will not even be permitted to publish their findings in journals in the usual way.

Writing about the gag orders and also Trump's executive order to freeze all EPA grants and projects at Nothing in Biology Makes Sense, grad student Christina Jenkins said, "Before now we were talking in hypotheticals, about what might happen if Trump was the president, what that might mean for science or for the environment. [The reality is scarier than I imagined.](#)"

Is this really the new government lowering the boom on taxpayer-funded science? Or is it scaremongering overreactions? Plait himself notes that, at data-minded FiveThirtyEight, Maggie Koerth-Baker is cautioning against immediate full-panic mode. [It's possible the restrictions are temporary](#), intended only to give the new administration a chance to settle in.

There's also evidence of confusion and crossed wires and, possibly, speedy reactions to public protests. On Tuesday, media reported that references to [climate change](#) had been ordered removed from the EPA's web site. Outrage surfaced immediately. On Wednesday, *Science*

reprinted a post from Robin Bravender and Hannah Hess of E&E News. They reported that the order to scrub all mention of climate change, said to have come directly from the White House, had been put on hold.

Temporary hold? Nobody knows for sure. But we may find out soon. At Vox, Brian Resnick points out that it's not unusual for work at government agencies to be halted briefly while new administration appointees get their acts together. A TrumPet told him that the [EPA restrictions will be lifted](#) today (Friday, Jan 27.)

We'll see.

OTOH, Resnick notes, even if the early outrage was overheated, there are plenty of reasons for concern. There's the Bush administration history of muzzling the EPA. There are anti-science declarations from the TrumPets. Trump transition team members have recommended that EPA stop funding science altogether.

The pushback from science has begun

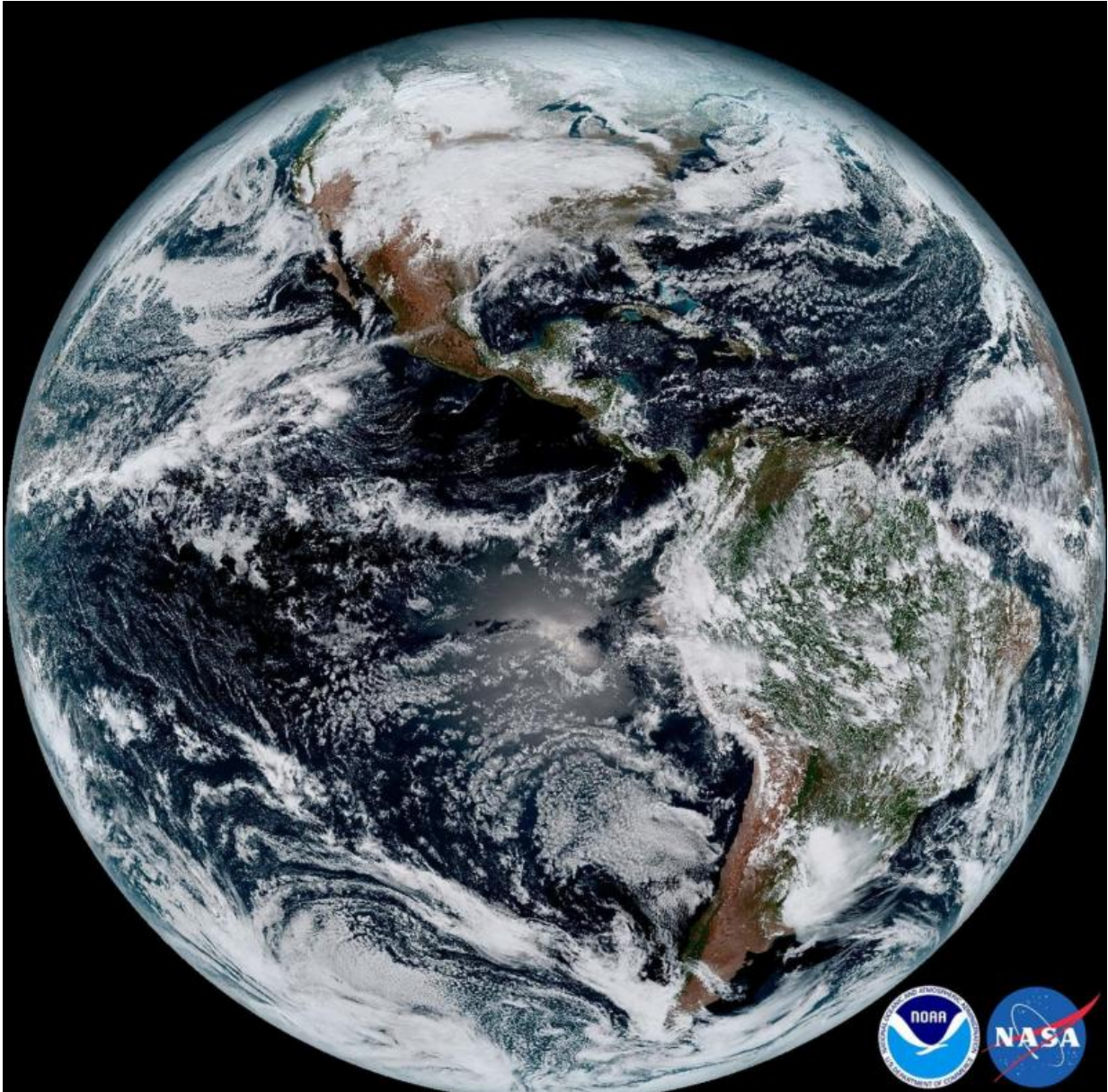
Predictably, [counter-tweets claiming to come from rebellious employees](#) at the EPA, the Forest Service, the USDA, and NASA sprang up immediately. At The Verge, Rich McCormick says there's reason to believe these claims may be genuine, although none has yet been verified. A lovely hed on this post: "On the internet, nobody knows if you're a National Park."

At Hit&Run, Ronald Bailey [provides handles for several of these alt tweet streams](#), which he calls "the revolt of the permanent government." (That's a compliment.) Bailey argues, "with exception perhaps of some minor amount of national security intelligence, there is no good reason that any information, data, studies, and reports that federal agencies produce should be kept from the public and press. In any case, I will be

following the Alt_Bureaucracy feeds for a while."

NeuroDojo Zen Faulkes posted on [how to demand that scientific societies show some backbone](#). "Ask yourself: "Have my professional societies done anything more political than say, 'Please don't cut funding?'" Will they fight?," he asked.

Scientists associated with the group 500 Women Scientists [donned lab coats and marched](#) in DC as part of the Women's March on Washington the day after Trump's Inauguration, Robinson Meyer reported at the Atlantic. A wildlife ecologist from North Carolina told Meyer, "I just can't believe we're having to yell, 'Science is real.'"



North and South America and surrounding oceans, photographed by GOES-16, NOAA's new geostationary weather satellite on Jan. 15.

Taking a cue from how the Women's March did its social media organizing, other scientists who want to set up a Washington march of their own have put together a closed Facebook group that claims more

than 600,000 members, Kate Sheridan writes at STAT. The [#ScienceMarch Twitter feed](#) says a date for the march will be posted in a few days. The group also plans to release tools to help people interested in local marches coordinate their efforts and avoid duplication.

At *The Atlantic*, Ed Yong describes the [political action committee 314Action](#). (314=the first three digits of pi.) Among other political activities, it is [holding a webinar on Pi Day–March 14](#)–to explain to scientists how to run for office. Yong calls 314Action the science version of Emily's List, which helps pro-choice candidates run for office. 314Action says it is ready to connect potential candidate scientists with mentors–and donors.

Other groups may be willing to step in when government agencies wimp out. A few days before the Inauguration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention abruptly and with no explanation cancelled [a 3-day meeting on the health effects of climate change](#) scheduled for February. Scientists told Ars Technica's Beth Mole that CDC has a history of running away from politicized issues.

One of the conference organizers from the American Public Health Association was quoted as saying nobody told the organizers to cancel.

I believe it. Just one more example of the chilling effect on global warming. In politics, once the Dear Leader's wishes are known, some hirelings will rush to gratify them without being asked.

The APHA guy said they simply wanted to head off a potential last-minute cancellation. Yeah, I guess an anticipatory pre-cancellation would do that.

But then–[Al Gore to the rescue!](#) He is joining with a number of health groups—including the American Public Health Association—to hold a one-

day meeting on the topic Feb 16 at the Carter Center in Atlanta, CDC's home base. Vox's Julia Belluz reports that it is not clear whether CDC officials will be part of the Gore rescue event.

Overseas, gags are not funny either

Meanwhile, a gag order familiar from previous Republican administrations, this one sometimes known as the Mexico City Rule, was resuscitated in a more comprehensively cruel form.

The original version prevents American aid from going to foreign family planning organizations that perform or even discuss abortion, even when the funding for them comes from other sources. The Trump-Pence version expands the rule to cover all global health organizations that get US funding.

"This means organizations that address everything from malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS to tropical diseases and vaccinations—the list goes on—[will now risk losing funding](#) if they even mention abortion," says Sarah Wildman at Vox.

In her post on the resuscitated climate change meeting, Belluz says, "The canceled event was one in a series of disruptions at science-related agencies following Trump's inauguration. Taken together, they suggest science in the age of Trump is on track for massive upheaval."

And that was Week One of the Trump-Pence administration.

Only 207 weeks to go.

Good grief.

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Provided by Public Library of Science

Citation: Trump info shutdowns at US science agencies, especially EPA (2017, January 30)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-01-trump-info-shutdowns-science-agencies.html>

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