

# **GOP senators wanted to stop climate change training for weathercasters. It backfired**

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In the long and fraught battle to persuade Americans that the Earth's climate is changing, scientists increasingly have relied on a stalwart ally—television weather forecasters.

TV weather people increasingly have been connecting hotter days and nights, extreme weather events, even increases in poison ivy and pollen, to the planet's slow and steady warming. Many of those reports have been informed and powered by a nonprofit educational organization, Climate Central.

While TV meteorologists have been gobbling up reports and camera-ready graphics on [climate change](#), the work of the New Jersey-based group has alarmed those who seek to cast doubt on the [science](#) that defines global warming. Last year, four [climate](#) skeptics in the U.S. Senate demanded an investigation of the \$4 million in [federal funding](#) provided for the Climate Central program, saying it "is not science—it is propagandizing."

After a nearly yearlong review, however, the National Science Foundation's inspector general has rejected the claim by the four Republicans—Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas, Rand Paul of Kentucky, and James M. Inhofe and James Lankford, both of Oklahoma. The inspector general's review "did not reveal any evidence that limitations on political activity ... were violated," a memorandum summarizing the investigation said.

Ben Strauss, chief executive and chief scientist at Climate Central, said he was pleased but not surprised by the conclusions of the science foundation's inspector general.

"We were always confident what we were doing was legitimate public education on science, with nothing political about it," Strauss said.

"Weather people are probably the closest thing that millions of Americans have in terms of daily contact with a person with science training," added Strauss, a Princeton-trained biologist. "It's obvious that our weather has been behaving in strange and new ways, and we are

simply helping weathercasters to help their audiences understand why."

A growing number of meteorologists have signed up to receive Climate Central briefings and graphics, which they often use on the air. The program started with 197 weathercasters in 2014 and jumped to 644 last year. A little more than halfway into 2019, about 750 meteorologists have requested Climate Central materials, the group said. (An additional 250 journalists also have received the information.)

Climate Central information or graphics appeared in 1,771 television news reports around the country in 2018 and in 1,196 TV reports through May of this year. The effect of that information has been magnified by social media, creating more than 9,000 total "impressions" in 2018, Climate Central says.

Jim Gandy, chief meteorologist at the CBS affiliate in Columbia, S.C., said the Climate Central reports help "take something happening globally and bring it right down to the local level. People experience these changes in their local community."

He said one report that particularly resonated with his viewers described how a change in the chemistry of the air—higher levels of carbon dioxide—spurred the growth of more poison ivy. The higher CO<sub>2</sub> levels had also more than doubled the toxicity of the shrub from the 1950s to the present.

"It was one of the first examples I used of how climate change has been causing these changes now, and through our whole lifetime," said Gandy, who recently retired.

The four GOP senators wrote their letter of protest to the National Science Foundation in June 2018. It charged that the agency had "issued several grants which seek to influence political and social debate rather

than conduct scientific research." Addressed to NSF Inspector General Allison Lerner, the letter suggested the agency had strayed from its mission to support science and possibly violated the Hatch Act, the federal law that prohibits federal employees from taking public political positions.

The senators said they found it suspicious that Climate Central targeted TV meteorologists, a group once shown in some surveys to have mixed views on the reality of human-caused climate change. The science foundation's oversight of Climate Central was "egregious," the senators said, because it supported work "designed to 'recruit' experts to a position they did not come to of their own accord as meteorologists."

To the contrary, the NSF inspector general's office concluded that the agency's grant makers followed internal policy, which requires independent scientists, engineers and educators to review all requests for funding. Climate Central submitted to, and passed, a thorough review, the inspector general's office found.

In making its determination, the inspector general cited a prior ruling from the Government Accountability Office that U.S. government spending for a range of different programs is improper if it is "completely devoid of any connection with official functions or so political in nature that it is not in furtherance of the purpose for which the funds were appropriated." That was not the case with the \$4 million the National Science Foundation spent to back Climate Central's program for weathercasters, the inspector general concluded.

The review also found that the Hatch Act had not been violated. That law attempts to prevent "activity directed toward the success or failure of a political party, candidate for partisan political office, or partisan political group."

Because it found no violations, the inspector general's office decided it did not need to proceed with a full audit of the Climate Central funding, its letter said.

Steve LaPointe, a weatherman in upstate New York, said it was the Republican senators who were engaging in politics, not Climate Central.

"Climate Central provides high-quality information. It's all scientifically based, extremely well researched and well vetted," said LaPointe of WRGB in Albany. "This is a group of senators that deny science, for whatever reason. I am gratified to know that the National Science Foundation defined this as science and supported it."

The senators did not respond to the findings from [inspector general](#). They also did not answer inquiries from the Los Angeles Times.

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