

Rescuing data and shoring up environmental agencies in the Trump era

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"The changes we're seeing reveal how this administration wants to change our understanding of climate change," says Lindsey Dillon, an assistant professor of sociology who studies environmental and economic justice in U.S. cities. Credit: University of California - Santa Cruz

A few days after the presidential election, Lindsey Dillon and a handful of like-minded scientists, lawyers, archivists, and academics got on email and brainstormed themselves into action, forming a network to respond quickly to any Trump

administration efforts to dismantle environmental policies and agencies.

Their immediate focus is monitoring federal websites to "rescue" vital scientific data that could be removed from the most "at risk" websites, including [climate-change](#) data on the Environmental Protection Agency's web pages. Their longer-term goal is tracking the websites of federal agencies, where "subtle rhetorical shifts" are already taking place, particularly in descriptions of climate change.

"The changes we're seeing reveal how this administration wants to change our understanding of climate change," says Dillon, an assistant professor of sociology who studies environmental and economic justice in U.S. cities.

"These broader, systemic changes in language impact how we will think about climate change and the effects of industry on the environment, and whether and how we can trust what the government says," she explains. "Ultimately, will this administration delegitimize [federal agencies](#) and the information they give the public?"

Immediately after taking office, President Trump took steps to stifle the EPA's official communications. Barely a month later, hundreds of volunteers are flocking to "data rescue" events hosted around the country.

"This isn't separate from the airport protests [on Trump's proposed immigration ban] or the Women's March," says Dillon. "People around the country aren't accepting what's happening as the new norm. This is one part of that."

Dillon is chair of the nine-member steering committee of the [Environmental Data and Governance Initiative](#) (EDGI; pronounced "edgy"), the network that coalesced in the days after the November election and has grown to more than 85

members. "Lindsey leads by listening, facilitating consensus building, and communicating clearly and concisely," said steering committee member Nick Shapiro, a fellow at the Chemical Heritage Foundation who initiated the conversation that led to EDGI. "She's pulling some of our more slapdash grassroots organizational practices into a consistent method."

Dillon also co-organized a recent data archiving weekend at UC Berkeley that attracted more than 170 volunteers; [Data Rescue](#) has 25 similar events planned around the country in coming weeks.

Data rescuers are focused on preserving public access to rich datasets, including information that is currently available on EPA, NASA, and Department of Energy websites. It's a mission that resonates at UC Santa Cruz, where computer scientists assembled the first complete sequence of the human genome—and promptly posted humanity's blueprint on the internet, ensuring that it would be freely accessible to all, forever.

However, Dillon expects the focus to shift to resisting the administration's attempts to cut the capacity of agencies to collect data in the future. "Budget cuts could jeopardize the collection of data," she warns.

Simultaneously, Dillon is part of a 10-member task force that is interviewing former EPA employees to gather "historical context" for the changes ushered in by previous presidential administrations. They want to gain insight into how previous political administrations cut the capacity of the EPA and measure the impacts of attrition, budget cuts, administration, and regional changes.

"Lindsey's leadership, and the scope of her engagement, is impressive and inspiring," said Sheldon Kamieniecki, dean of the Division of Social Sciences at UC Santa Cruz. Kamieniecki, a political scientist who specializes in environmental policy, called Dillon a great addition to the faculty on a campus known for its commitment to social justice and environmental stewardship.

As close as Dillon can come to a identifying a historical moment like today's was the 1980

election of Ronald Reagan, which ousted environmental advocate Jimmy Carter. Reagan's election triggered a sense of dread among long-term EPA staffers—and devastating [budget cuts](#) led by Reagan's first EPA administrator Anne Gorsuch, mother of current U.S. Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch.

"Still, it isn't even comparable to what we're facing today," emphasizes Dillon, whose long-term goal is to contribute to a positive vision of "robust environmental governance" based on evidence-based environmental policy.

"In what feels like dark times, I'm putting my energy into something specific," says Dillon. "I'm trying to do something well. I am more hopeful than pessimistic."

It's a lot to take on during her first year as a faculty member, and Dillon is grateful for support from the Academic Senate's Committee on Research, which provided support that allowed her to hire graduate students Megan Martenyi and Vivian Underhill, who are tracking federal environmental legislation introduced since early January.

"It's inspiring, and it's certainly not just me," says Dillon. "The stakes are so high. This is why I'm here in this job. I really care about all of these issues. I chose this career to do research in the public interest."

Provided by University of California - Santa Cruz

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