

Trump administration throws cold water on climate change threat to coral reefs

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When pollsters informed President Donald Trump that he faces political exposure in the 2020 election with swing voters on environment policy, he decided to respond with a White House address claiming stewardship

of clean water, air and oceans.

But as some Trump aides were drafting that speech, others were casting doubt on the significance of a climate threat to a key battleground state: the degradation of coral reefs in Florida.

Weeks before, a senior intelligence analyst at the State Department had submitted a draft of planned testimony to Congress detailing the national security implications of climate change for White House review.

Among the edits that the analyst, Rod Schoonover, received back from the White House was a novel argument. National Security Council officials issued a challenge to the scientific consensus that warming oceans pose an intensifying mortal threat to [coral reef systems](#), home to a quarter of all marine life and a vital resource in the global food market.

In the past decade, 90-95% of coral on the Florida Reef have died or incurred severe damage, according to scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which estimates the [reef](#) sustains roughly 70,000 jobs in South Florida and generates over \$4.4 billion in annual sales.

"There is no evidence that [coral bleaching](#) is intensifying now or will in the future," reads the comment, attributed to the NSC. Two sources said it was written by William Happer, a prominent skeptic of climate change. "Coral reefs have bleached and usually recovered throughout their evolutionary history."

That position has spooked government experts who have worked in marine biology for decades, and who in recent years sounded alarm bells over the consequences of mass die-offs along U.S. shorelines and beyond.

Scientists say bleaching occurs when coral expel algae in response to an increase in sea temperatures. The algae give coral their color, and without it, they are left bone white. But algae also provide coral with their primary source of food and sustenance.

The more frequently bleaching events occur, the less time damaged coral have to recover from the last event—and the more likely they are to die from starvation or disease.

Corals in Florida were hit by severe bleaching in both 2014 and 2015—the warmest years on record—and in 2015, Hawaii saw the worst bleaching and coral mortality ever recorded. Guam and American Samoa have also experienced repeat bleaching events over the past six years, according to Mark Eakin, coordinator of the NOAA Coral Reef Watch.

Eakin questioned the scientific basis of the NSC commentary.

"Clearly this is someone who either is not aware of the scientific literature that overwhelmingly shows that coral bleaching has increased—and most certainly will continue to increase as the climate warms—or they're ignoring that literature," Eakin said. "Normally, documents of this sort require vetting by experts within the administration, and those experts usually include people who are knowledgeable in the subject. We don't know what was done in this case."

Schoonover's leaked testimony, Eakin continued, "appears accurate and consistent with a large amount of public literature, including the last four reports from an intergovernmental panel on climate change. And it is consistent with what we have analyzed at NOAA and with what we have published on coral bleaching multiple times."

The wide scope of climate-related threats facing Florida has convinced

some of its leading Republican lawmakers to acknowledge humanity's role in the crisis. The state's two GOP senators, Marco Rubio and Rick Scott, joined Hawaii's Democratic Sens. Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono last week in sponsoring the Restoring Resilient Reefs Act of 2019, a bill that would restore federal assistance for coral protection and emphasizes their economic and ecological significance.

That bill attributes the challenges facing coral reefs to "human-accelerated changes, including increasing ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, coral diseases, and invasive species."

White House officials would not confirm the authenticity of the Schoonover document, first obtained by the Washington Post. Schoonover—who resigned from the State Department over the NSC edits—later ruffled feathers in the administration by publishing an op-ed in the *New York Times* accusing the White House of politicizing climate science.

"We don't comment on deliberative matters, where this appears to be a clear example—someone in the U.S. bureaucracy believing their way is the only way, and trying to undermine the president by leaking internal deliberative information," a senior administration official told McClatchy.

But the degradation of coral reefs "is a problem," the official continued. "We're serious about it."

"We understand that [coral reefs](#) and their ecosystems offer benefits to humankind, as sources of food, livelihood, recreation and shoreline protection," said the official, who was not authorized to speak on the record. "Reefs are facing multiple threats including pollution, unsustainable destructive fishing practices, coastal development, and global threats such as ocean acidification and coral bleaching."

The official pointed to language in the International Coral Reef Initiative's "call to action" in 1995, which claims that "reasons for the decline in reef health are varied, complex, and often difficult to accurately determine."

Since the mid-1990s, reef systems around the globe have faced increasingly frequent mass bleaching events.

While the Florida and Caribbean reefs have been especially damaged, Australia's Great Barrier Reef—the most publicly recognizable system in the world—has suffered from mass bleaching events in 2016 and 2017, leaving over a third of its coral stark white.

"There's denialism, and then there's really fringe," said one climate expert who has worked on interagency government review efforts.

"Coral bleaching has not typically fallen within denialist rhetoric," the expert continued. "Most people would not see this as a climate issue, and wouldn't feel the need to deny it—you could believe in warmer oceans without believing in climate change. But this goes well beyond that. This says all marine biology is off."

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