

TESTIMONY OF JOEL CLEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE,
SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY AND SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT

JOINT HEARING ON SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY IN FEDERAL AGENCIES

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Thank you Chairwoman Stevens, Ranking Member Baird, Chairwoman Sherrill, Ranking Member Norman, Full Committee Chairwoman Johnson, and Ranking Member Lucas for the opportunity to testify. This is my first time submitting testimony for a Congressional hearing and as someone who considers public service an honor, I'm very pleased to offer my oral and written testimony, particularly in support of scientific integrity at Federal agencies.

I'm here because of my tenure and role as a Senior Executive at the Interior Department for seven years. As Director of the Office of Policy Analysis, it was my job to understand the most recent scientific and analytical information regarding matters that affected the mission of the agency, and to advise agency leadership on those matters. While I have a science background, I was not employed as a scientist. It was my job, however, to know the scientists at the agency, understand their research and results, and communicate this information and its implications for policies and procedures at the agency.

I suffered no illusion that the science would win out every single time, but believed that if you provide leaders with the most accurate and reliable information, they will make better decisions; if you provide them with evidence that is based on rigorous inquiry, they will at very least know the consequences of their decisions.

I never considered the possibility that they would not want to have the best information, or that they would actively suppress scientific evidence. This runs counter to the notion of public service, and is an abdication of leadership regarding public health and safety. Unfortunately, that's exactly what I've seen happen during the Trump Administration, and the inhumanity of it sends chills down my spine.

Right now there are dozens of Alaska Native villages imperiled by the impacts of climate change¹, frontline American communities addressing dramatic impacts as we speak. These are not model projections, these are impacts happening before our eyes. Each week we read studies and media reports about the shockingly warm conditions in the Arctic, how the warming trend is accelerating permafrost thaw and the loss of sea ice², how those changes have dire implications

¹ <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-551>

² Researchers warn Congress of 'unprecedented' ice loss: <https://www.eenews-net.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/eedaily/2019/07/12/stories/1060727323>

for the rest of the planet³, and how the changes are outstripping even the model predictions.⁴ Each summer it becomes less shocking to hear about wildfires in the Arctic⁵ that are burning forest and tundra now as we speak.⁶ What we rarely hear about are the parents and children and uncles who are falling through unreliable ice and perishing, or the difficulty of maintaining a subsistence way of life in a transforming environment, or the existential stress of living in a village that is one big storm away from being wiped off the face of the map.⁷

Living in the Arctic means adapting to crisis on a daily basis as the world is transforming around you – and that transformation is accelerating beyond expectations. These conditions – caused by humanity’s greenhouse-gas emissions – are increasing risk for Americans and businesses in the region and have dire implications for the rest of the planet.⁸

This is the scientific and social reality that I was speaking about publicly when I was abruptly reassigned, along with dozens of other Senior Executives, by then-Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. The week before my reassignment I was speaking at the United Nations about the need to build resilience in the face of climate change, and the following week I was moved to the auditing office that collects and disperses royalty income from oil, gas, and mining companies. I was one of dozens of senior executives who were reassigned that night in what media described as a “purge” that sent a message for other career civil servants to keep their heads down on issues that run counter to the Trump Administration’s anti-science and pro-fossil-fuel rhetoric.

I became a public whistleblower⁹ and resigned a few months later.¹⁰ I quit because Secretary Zinke clearly had no intention of addressing the urgent climate issues impacting the Agency’s mission and was betraying taxpayers while neglecting his role as a leader. It was heartbreaking to leave public service, but I’d already lost the job I was qualified for and didn’t want to lose my voice on the most pressing issue we face today.

I’ve had abundant opportunities to use that voice because nearly every week political appointees at Interior or the EPA have ignored the science, increased risk to Americans and American businesses, and provided new favors for fossil fuel or other industry interests, acting against the best interests of taxpayers. Since my reassignment two years ago, not a week has passed that I

³ AMAP, 2017. Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost in the Arctic (SWIPA) 2017, <https://www.amap.no/documents/doc/snow-water-ice-and-permafrost-in-the-arctic-swipa-2017/1610>

⁴ Canada’s Changing Climate Report <https://changingclimate.ca/CCCR2019/>

⁵ Unprecedented Wildfires Burned Across the Arctic Circle in June https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qv79b5/unprecedented-wildfires-are-burning-across-the-arctic-circle

⁶ Unprecedented Wildfires in the Arctic <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/unprecedented-wildfires-arctic>

⁷ In Alaska, Climate Change Is Showing Increasing Signs of Disrupting Everyday Life https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2019/05/08/alaska-climate-change-is-showing-increasing-signs-disrupting-everyday-life/?utm_term=.8469b357eeba

⁸ From Crisis to Resilience in the Arctic <https://www.arctictoday.com/from-crisis-to-resilience-in-the-arctic/>

⁹ I’m a Scientist. I’m Blowing the Whistle on the Trump Administration https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/im-a-scientist-the-trump-administration-reassigned-me-for-speaking-up-about-climate-change/2017/07/19/389b8dce-6b12-11e7-9c15-177740635e83_story.html?utm_term=.0cad863b781

¹⁰ Read Joel Clement’s Resignation Letter <https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/national/read-joel-clements-resignation-letter/2566/>

have not been contacted for comment regarding this Administration's shameful denial of science and our current climate emergency.

I also continue to receive emails and phone calls from federal scientists and experts, many of whom I've never met, thanking me for being their voice while their agency leadership silences them, ignores their expertise, and undermines their agency's mission.

While every federal scientist hopes to influence policy with their work, it is never guaranteed. What they do expect, however, is the ability to conduct and communicate their research and findings without interference from politicians, to advance their careers with publications and presentations, to engage with peers both within and outside of the federal science enterprise, and to ensure that their findings are available to the American public that paid for the research.

Unfortunately, some agencies have had difficulty assuring even these fundamental workplace conditions and establishing a culture of scientific integrity. The Government Accountability Office, which conducted an audit that was published in April, 2019,¹¹ found some agencies lacking in their implementation of scientific integrity policies and procedures. From my personal experience, however, and that of my former colleagues, the problem runs far deeper than indicated in the GAO report.

For example, the GAO audit indicated that all nine of the audited agencies had addressed the need to ensure a "culture of scientific integrity." At Interior, agency scientists are self-censoring their reports and deleting the term climate change to avoid being targeted by political appointees, they are barred from speaking to reporters without advance permission from the agency, they face new barriers for attending the professional conferences that constitute their professional development, and their work is being incompletely communicated to the public, if shared at all.¹² At the Agriculture Department, there are instances of political staff withholding important scientific reports from the public.¹³ At the US Geological Survey, the Director is requiring scientists to only use climate models that predict changes for 40 years – a virtually meaningless time frame in the policy context.¹⁴

These conditions do not in any way reflect a culture of scientific integrity. They are just a few of the red flags that are suggesting an accelerating erosion and politicization not only of scientific integrity, but the federal science enterprise itself. This culture of fear, censorship, and suppression is keeping incredibly capable federal scientists from sharing important information with the public or participating as professionals in their field. Americans are not getting their money's worth as long as these conditions persist.¹⁵

¹¹ <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-265>

¹² Officials Removed Climate References from Press Releases https://www.eenews-net.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/climatewire/stories/1060709857/most_read

¹³ Agriculture Department Buries Studies Showing Dangers of Climate Change <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/23/agriculture-department-climate-change-1376413>

¹⁴ Trump Administration Hardens Its Attack on Climate Science <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/us/politics/trump-climate-science.html>

¹⁵ The State of Science in the Trump Era. Union of Concerned Scientists, 2019 <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2019/01/ucs-trump-2yrs-report.pdf>

H.R. 1709, the Scientific Integrity Act, provides a number of measures that would begin to address this problem; it would establish important statutory requirements for implementing and enforcing scientific integrity policies and elevate the role of those who manage the policies. It is difficult to address these issues with the nuance and flexibility required to achieve the desired outcomes, but H.R. 1709, with some refinements, is a necessary step for putting the foundational pieces in place to build a culture of scientific integrity.

The role of the public servant is to make decisions and establish policies that improve the health, safety, and well-being of Americans and the ecosystems they depend upon. Doing so requires a solid understanding of the world we live in and the consequences of our actions. Ignoring or suppressing science leaves our best player on the bench at a time when we are facing a global crisis. This is not just a wonky policy matter, there are important consequences of this neglect – and first among them is an increased risk to the health and safety of the people – such as the Alaska Natives in the Arctic or other frontline communities and businesses at risk – that look to the federal government for help.

Instead of sidelining science, now is the time to invest more heavily in research and scientists, restore public trust in the scientific enterprise that has made America such a great country, and ensure that our political leaders respect the links between science, good policy, and well-being. H.R. 1709 is a great first step, and could lead to a snowball effect of smart, informed policy measures to protect and enhance the federal science enterprise.

BIOGRAPHY FOR JOEL CLEMENT

Joel Clement is a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. With a background in resilience, climate change adaptation, and Arctic social-ecological systems, he is working with partners to improve the knowledge and tools necessary to reduce risk and increase resilience in frontline areas such as the Arctic region. Prior to joining the Harvard Belfer Center, Mr. Clement served as an executive for seven years at the US Department of the Interior.

In July 2017, he became the first public whistleblower of the Trump Administration, accusing Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke of stifling science, ignoring climate change, wasting taxpayer dollars, and risking the health and safety of Americans in the Arctic. He received the Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage and resigned from public service in October of that year. Since then he has received multiple awards for ethics, courage, and his dedication to the role of science in public policy.

Before serving in the federal Government, Joel was the Conservation Science Program Officer for a private foundation where he focused on climate change adaptation strategies and landscape-scale conservation efforts from Alaska to New Mexico. Prior to his career in philanthropy, Joel spent a decade as a forest canopy ecologist, developing and contributing to research and conservation science programs in temperate and tropical forest ecosystems around the world. In addition to his role at Harvard, he is an Associate with the Stockholm Environment Institute and

a Senior Fellow with the Union of Concerned Scientists. He has published peer review articles on forest ecology and science-policy linkages, multiple federal government reports, and numerous articles in the popular media, including Washington Post, Denver Post, CNN, Scientific American, Huffington Post, the Washington Monthly, and Arctic Today, in which he addressed science, policy, Arctic transformation, and the urgency of the climate crisis.