

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 12, 2019

Dr. James F. Reilly II, Director
U.S. Geological Survey
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive
Reston, VA 20192

Dear Director Reilly,

We are writing to express deep concern over recent reporting that the United States Geological Survey (USGS) will only be utilizing climate models that project the effects of climate change through 2040, rather than the previously accepted practice of using models that project through the end of the century. This decision appears to be another in a long line of politically motivated moves within the Department of the Interior, and more broadly across this administration, to suppress climate change science.

The New York Times reported on May 27, 2019 that you “ordered that scientific assessments produced by [USGS] use only computer-generated climate models that project the impact of climate change through 2040, rather than through the end of the century, as had been done previously.” This not only conceals in future documents the impacts that we will face at both the mid-century time frame (2036-2065) and the late-century time frame (2071-2100) that were included in the most recent National Climate Assessment (NCA4), but also removes from the discussion how critical these impacts are to the emissions choices we make today.

Hiding this information from the American public not only paralyzes the ability to execute informed decision-making today to reduce future emissions impacts, but would be further compounded by the administration’s intent to leave the “worst case scenario” out of future assessments and their attempt to discredit this scenario in the NCA4. This is particularly concerning given how our current emissions pathway most closely follows the “worst case scenario” and that if, as the NCA4 warns, fossil fuel use continues unrestrained, “the earth’s atmosphere could warm by as much as eight degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century,” which would result in catastrophic societal issues that include decreasing food production and negative impacts on public health.

Additionally, this decision goes against the fundamental understanding that climate modeling is conducted on a long-term scale. Indeed, the NCA4 states “‘Climate’ is defined as weather conditions over multiple decades, and climate model projections are generally not designed to capture annual or even decadal variation in climate conditions. Instead, projections are typically used to capture long-term changes, such as how the climate system will respond to changes in greenhouse gas levels over this century.”

Previous reporting from the Los Angeles Times on June 22, 2018 detailed new restrictions on the ability of USGS scientists to speak publicly about their research results without getting permission to do so. This undermines their independence and makes political interference in the communication of their work more likely. USGS scientists also reported self-censorship related to climate change in a recent survey conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, with 21 percent of respondents reporting having been asked or told to omit the phrase “climate change” from their work.

The USGS is the premier science agency for the Department of the Interior and has the mission of serving the nation by “providing reliable scientific information to describe and understand the Earth; minimize loss of life and property from natural disasters; manage water, biological, energy, and mineral resources; and enhance and protect our quality of life.” Your decision to limit the scope of climate modeling goes against your agency’s very mission, gives the strong impression of being politically motivated, given the anti-climate change stance of this administration, and is a disservice to the American public. As climate modeling is used as the basis for many important planning decisions made by local, state, and federal governments, as well as industries our nation relies upon, it is imperative that climate projections, data, and documents provided by USGS be scientifically sound and free of political bias. Putting science through political filters does significant harm to our ability to understand and address environmental and public health threats.

As it runs counter to the mission of USGS and your responsibility to oversee the administration of that mission, we first ask that if this decision has been made, that you rescind it. Should you choose to move forward, we request that you clarify that scientists are encouraged to use whatever methods are best to adequately assess the current and potential consequences of climate change and affirm to USGS staff and the public, consistent with the USGS and Department of the Interior scientific integrity policies, that scientists are free to communicate the results of their research with Congress, policymakers, and the public without political interference. We also request that you provide answers to the following questions:

1. As a scientist yourself, do you personally believe that modeling climate 20 years into the future is sufficient, given that the industry-accepted practice is to project through the end of the century?
2. What information went into the process leading up to this decision?
3. Who was consulted – internally and externally – to provide the information that went into making this decision?
4. What are the potential long-term impacts of removing both long-term and worst-case-scenario information from climate forecasting?
5. What information will be provided to entities that rely on longer-term forecasting now that there will be a significant gap in available data?

6. How does this decision, which would only utilize projections 19 to 20 years into the future, comport with the Global Change Research Act of 1990, which governs USGS activities and states that "the Council, through the Committee, shall prepare and submit to the President and the Congress an assessment which...analyzes current trends in global change, both human-induced and natural, and projects major trends for the subsequent 25 to 100 years"?

We request that you provide a response no later than July 25, 2019. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



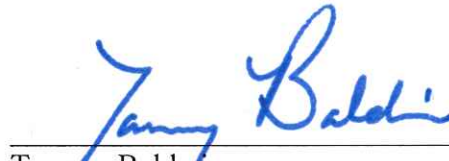
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Tammy Baldwin
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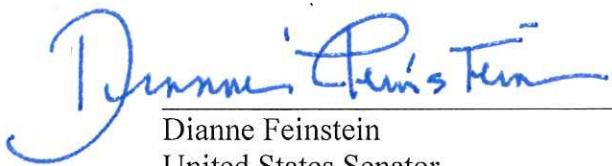
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



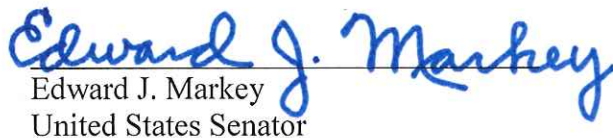
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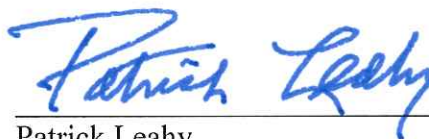
Sherrod Brown
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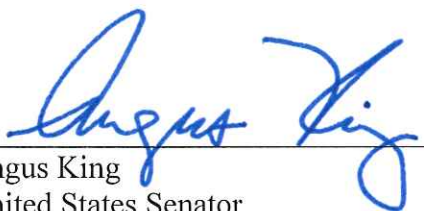
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



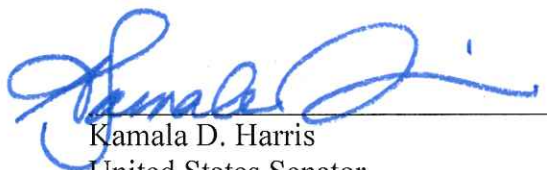
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