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Climate Forward

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration offices in Silver Spring, Md., an agency that the conservative Project 2025 said “should be broken up and downsized.” Matt Roth for The New York Times

How Trump's return could affect climate and weather data



By Austyn Gaffney

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration might not be a household name, but the federal agency is ubiquitous in homes and businesses across the U.S.

That's because this federal office of scientific research, and its more familiar arm, the National Weather Service, stores a mind-boggling amount of data that we use everyday. Data from the Weather Service powers many weather forecasts as well as the emergency alerts that ping to our smart devices, helping us decide what to wear, where to go and how to protect ourselves and our families from extreme weather events becoming more frequent under climate change.

In the 2018 book "The Fifth Risk," which details efforts to shrink the federal government under Donald Trump's first presidential administration, the author Michael Lewis described what it would mean to lose NOAA information.

"Without that data and the Weather Service to make sense of it," Lewis wrote, "no plane would fly, no bridge would be built and no war would be fought — at least not well."

But the agency that oversees that omnipresent data could now be under threat by a second Trump administration.

That's according to Project 2025, the [policy framework](#) put together by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The authors of the nearly 900 page document wrote that NOAA "should be broken up and downsized," calling the agency that employs 12,000 workers across the world "one of the main drivers of the climate change alarm industry."

"Climate data is absolutely at risk with Project 2025's call to dissolve the agency," said Gretchen Gehrke, cofounder of the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, a small group formed in 2016 to back up climate information.

Trump has called climate change a hoax and said he would rollback climate regulations, and, according to Lewis's book, officials in the Trump White House did not know that NOAA existed or what it did when Trump took office in 2017.

In 2017, Trump nominated [Barry Lee Myers, then the chief executive of the for-profit weather company AccuWeather, to run NOAA](#) even though Myers had spent decades pushing to privatize the Weather Service. After his appointment stalled in the Senate for two years, [Myers withdrew his nomination](#), citing medical issues.

The Heritage Foundation said in an email that it would not comment on questions about Project 2025 and climate data.

Trump, for his part, [disavowed Project 2025 during his campaign](#), and his transition team spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said in an email that “no policy should be deemed official unless it comes directly from President Trump.”

While climate data did not disappear under the first Trump administration, climate scientists said they expected the second Trump administration to be more organized and strategic. The Trump transition team did not comment on questions about the maintenance or retention of climate data.



A flight with NOAA's Hurricane Hunter flight team through Tropical Storm Helene over the Gulf of Mexico in September. Zack Wittman for The New York Times

What NOAA does

NOAA, which was formed in 1970, is a mishmash of federal offices that is housed under the Commerce Department and tasked with understanding and protecting the nation's natural resources, a broad assignment that has evolved to cover everything from marine research to storm alerts.

“The data we archive now can be used to solve problems we cannot currently fathom,” John Bateman, a NOAA spokesman, said.

The agency's data and scientific expertise help predict deadly heat waves, increasingly powerful storms and threats from wildfires, floods and hurricanes.

These dangers have only grown as climate change has intensified, and as [carbon emissions have hit record levels](#).

NOAA's data is archived every month at four offices across the country called the National Centers for Environmental Information. Older agencies under NOAA's umbrella have been collecting data for almost 200 years, from paper and film records, satellites, buoys, radars and weather stations. NOAA now stores more than 65 million gigabytes of data, or roughly the capacity of four million smartphones.

But those centers are vulnerable to the very climate they're collecting data on. Hurricane Helene, [which was rainier and windier because of climate change](#), knocked out one of these offices in Asheville, N.C. this fall, which led to a delay in global climate reports and a loss of observational data that "might eventually be unrecoverable," [the agency said](#).

Other threats to NOAA data

In the wake of the 2016 election and perceived threats to federal climate and environmental agencies, grassroots efforts sprung up to protect the data. The [Azimuth Climate Data Backup Project](#), a group of volunteer data wonks, raised more than \$20,000 on Kickstarter to store about 30 terabytes of climate data. Other groups at university campuses and libraries hosted more than [50 hackathons](#) for volunteers to download and store even more.

While some groups like Azimuth have shuttered — though its data from 2017 still exists on a private server — the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative has continued over the past eight years. Dr. Gehrke said the group planned to download data, save federal webpages and record interviews with federal employees, regardless of any actions Trump might take.

But not everyone thinks this pre-emptive work is necessary.

NOAA is required by law to gather and hold climate data, and deleting it would be illegal, Craig McLean, who was chief scientist at NOAA under both Trump and President Biden, told my colleague Christopher Flavelle. McLean said he would be "really surprised" if the new Trump administration tried to delete any data.

"Changing where we store the backups is related to changes in technology, not in administrations," Bateman said in an email.

But activists and climate scientists worry that even if NOAA isn't shuttered or data isn't illegally deleted, the threat of defunding the federal agency could limit its capacity to collect and maintain climate data.

“Even if it's not explicitly targeting the deletion of data,” Dr. Gehrke said, “defunding agencies will lead to the destruction of data.”



THE CLIMATE FIX

A global carbon-credit market

The problem: Almost 200 countries have set targets under the Paris Agreement for reducing their emissions. But those targets “fall far short” of the reductions needed to stop global temperatures from climbing by 1.5 degrees Celsius compared with preindustrial times, [according to the United Nations](#).

The fix: Hitting those goals requires money — lots of it — and **carbon credits**, also called **carbon offsets**, are one way of getting this money to the places that need it. Carbon credits are tied to projects, often located in developing nations, that are aimed at removing or avoiding emissions.

But there has never been a broadly accepted system for the buying and selling of these credits.

This week, a U.N. system for those credits got closer to becoming reality. Negotiators at COP29 in Azerbaijan reached an agreement for how to assess what kinds of carbon credits would qualify under this U.N. framework. The agreement expands on a key part of the Paris Agreement, known as Article 6, [whose aim](#) is to allow countries to work together to meet their climate goals.

“This will be a game-changing tool to direct resources to the developing world and help us save up to 250 billion dollars a year when implementing our climate plans,” Yalchin Rafiyev, the lead negotiator of COP29, [said this week](#).

At COP29, countries are haggling over a new target for how much money developing nations should receive to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change, [a notoriously contentious issue](#).

The obstacles: Carbon credits have been attacked in recent years by critics who have cast doubt on their [integrity and quality](#), which has hurt the voluntary

carbon market's image and made some potential buyers hesitant.

The U.N.'s supervisory body, or the group that's helming this carbon-credit framework, has both a challenge and an opportunity to learn from the market's problems, said Alexia Kelly, managing director of the carbon policy and markets initiative at the High Tide Foundation.

"How well this mechanism works is really going to be dictated by the rigor of the rules that they approve," said Kelly, who was the lead negotiator on Article 6 for the United States in the Paris Agreement.

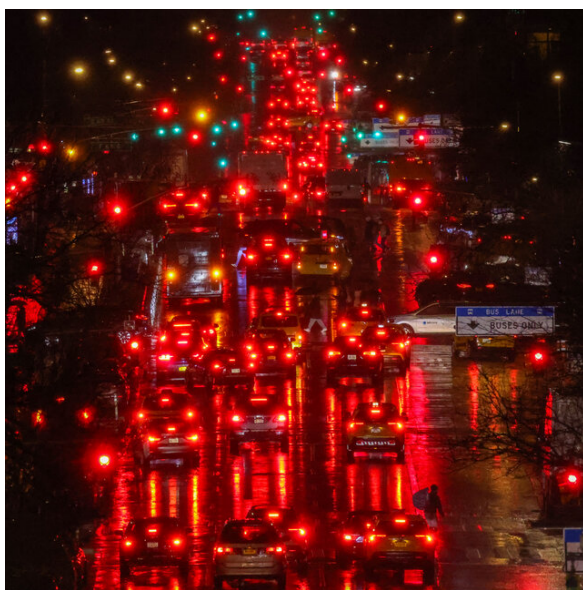
Not only do carbon credits face questions over their integrity, but some critics say they offer a way for companies to buy their way out of curbing their own carbon footprints.

What's next: The U.N. body working on this issue will likely start to approve the specific types of carbon credits that will be eligible under its framework next year, Kelly said.

The U.N. group also has a [preliminary plan](#) for engaging with stakeholders next year about how to make this carbon-credit market function effectively. —

Allison Prang

OTHER CLIMATE NEWS

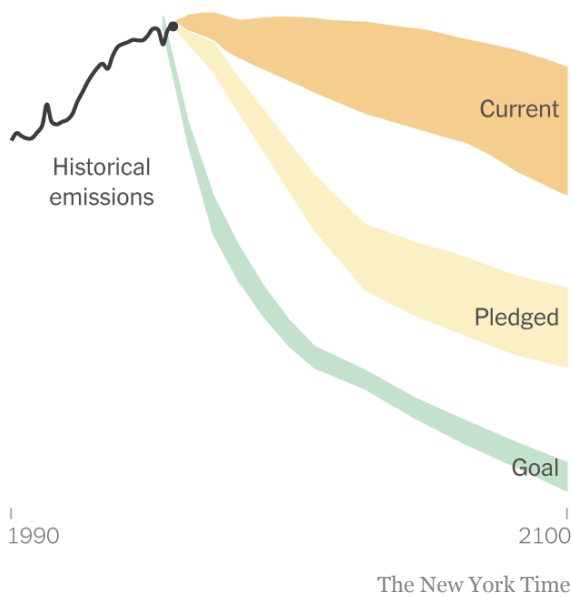


Charly Triballeau/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

New York Joins a Global City Club, With a Deal on Congestion Pricing

The city will be the first in the U.S. to adopt a fee on driving in certain areas, with the aim of reducing traffic and pollution. For some other cities, that has long been the norm.

By Somini Sengupta



A Big Climate Goal Is Getting Farther Out of Reach

A new report forecasts global temperature increases well above the level that world leaders have pledged to avoid.

By Brad Plumer and Mira Rojanasakul

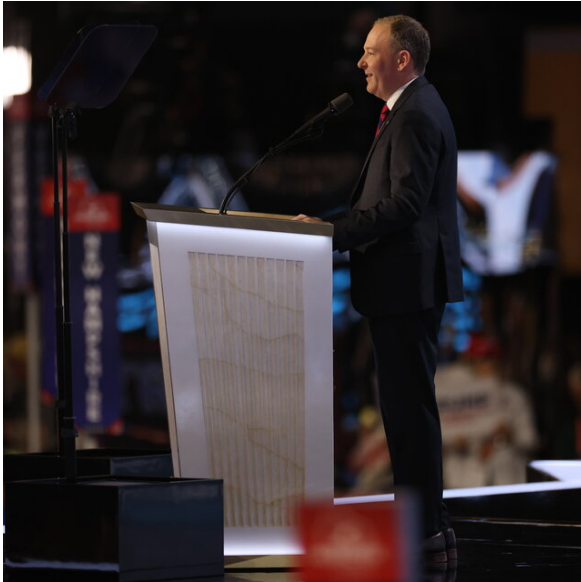


Punit Paranjpe/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

'Fossil Fuels Are Still Winning': Global Emissions Head for a Record

Countries promised to move away from coal, oil and natural gas at last year's climate summit. New research shows they're burning more than ever before.

By Brad Plumer



Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

Lee Zeldin Knows How to Defend Trump. Will He Defend the Environment?

The choice of Mr. Zeldin, a former Republican congressman of New York, to be the next E.P.A. administrator caught even some of his closest allies by surprise.

By Nicholas Fandos and Lisa Friedman

More climate news:

- [The Washington Post explains](#) which of the Inflation Reduction Act's consumer rebates may be overturned.
- Africa is struggling to pay for the kind of reliable weather forecasts that are crucial to helping it fight climate change, [Reuters reports](#).
- [In a Times Opinion piece](#), two climate scientists argue that the world needs better and more recent climate data.

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