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EPA

Agency keeps scientists from speaking at watershed conference

[Arianna Skibell](#), E&E News reporter

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U.S. EPA prevented scientists from speaking about a climate report on Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. Charlie Walker/Wikimedia Commons

U.S. EPA has asked three scientists to not speak at a conference today in Providence, R.I., about the state of Narragansett Bay and its watershed program.

The conference features the release of a report three years in the making on the status of New England's largest estuary. The 500-page [document](#) includes an extensive section on climate change.

The New York Times first reported that two EPA scientists and one contractor would no longer present at the conference. EPA spokesman and former Trump campaign worker John Konkus confirmed the news and attributed the decision to the nature of the event.

"EPA scientists are attending, they simply are not presenting, it is not an EPA conference," he said in an email to *The Washington Post*.

Konkus is a onetime congressional staffer and media consultant who served as the North Florida field office manager for then-candidate Donald Trump's presidential campaign last fall. In an unusual move, all grant requests since August have gone through his office for review ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 17).

EPA's \$26 million National Estuary Program — slated for elimination under the White House's fiscal 2018 budget — funds 28 state programs and helps support Narragansett Bay efforts. Rhode Island gets about \$600,000.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), who is scheduled to speak at the event, said Narragansett Bay is one of his state's most important economic assets. EPA needs to work with local leaders to plan for its future, he said.

"Whatever you think about climate change, this kind of collaboration should be a no-brainer," he said in a statement. "Muzzling our leading scientists benefits no one."

The director of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, Tom Borden, said the head of EPA's Atlantic Ecology Division at the National Health and Environmental Effects Research Laboratory told him last week that Autumn Oczkowski, the keynote speaker and division research ecologist, would not speak at the event. Oczkowski's colleague Rose Martin and an EPA contractor, Emily Shumchenia, would likewise not present.

The move comes as onlookers worry EPA is squelching information about climate change. Pruitt has publicly questioned whether human activity is contributing to global warming. And last week, EPA webpages about climate change returned to the agency's website but without references to rising temperatures ([Climatewire](#), Oct. 20).

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) said "muzzling" EPA scientists is not the way to address climate change. "While the Trump Administration tries to suppress the facts, the American people are seeing and feeling the real world impacts," he said in an emailed statement.

"We need to work on a bipartisan basis to reduce pollution and emissions," he said, "and this type of hostility toward science inhibits rather than furthers discussion and action."

While President Trump has called global warming a hoax and downplayed its potential impact on the recent spate of devastating hurricanes, some government agencies seem to be speaking out anyway.

Last week, NOAA Fisheries researchers linked shifts in food webs to climate change ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 20). And the Department of Energy yesterday tweeted a map demonstrating how climate change threatens U.S. energy infrastructure.

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