

U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Demands answers from commerce IG on reports of suppression and retaliation at NOAA

Posted on Wednesday, Sep 11, 2019

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), ranking member of the Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard, and 13 Senate Democrats, led by Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI), wrote to U.S. Department of Commerce Inspector General Peggy Gustafson demanding answers following recent reports of improper behavior at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), including one that Commerce Department officials threatened to fire NOAA employees for contradicting the President's false assertions about the projected path of Hurricane Dorian.

In their letter, the Senators also denounced the administration's repeated attempts to censor, withhold and undermine science for partisan political gain at the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, as well as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"Scientists within the federal government work for the American people, not for private industry or the President's personal vanity. Individuals and families across the country rely on weather forecasting to determine everything from what they wear each day to the decision to evacuate a home during extreme weather events. As deadly extreme weather becomes more and more common, maintaining public trust in these reports becomes increasingly important. Agency officials should not be sacrificing trustworthy weather reporting for political gain," the Senators write.

The Senators also requested the following information related to the circumstances surrounding the past week's events within NOAA:

1. Whether Department officials who are not subject matter experts have suppressed or altered—or are actively suppressing or altering—scientific products or communications;
2. Whether Department officials were pressured or explicitly directed by the White House to take the actions reported or to overrule career staff;
3. The legality of any actions by Department officials, who are not subject matter experts, who altered or witnessed any alterations to scientific products of communications; and
4. Whether Department officials retaliated or made political decisions that have impacted NOAA's ability to fulfill its mission to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

Joining Senators Baldwin and Hirono on the letter to Inspector General Gustafson are U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Ed Markey (D-MA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Mark Warner (D-VA), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Ron Wyden (D-OR).

The full text of the letter to Inspector General Gustafson is available [here](#) and below. An online version of this release is available [here](#).

Dear Ms. Gustafson,

We are aware that you have opened an investigation and are writing to request you gather information on specific activities that have been highlighted in recent reporting. These reports have indicated that officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have put forward directives interpreted as warning NOAA employees against contradicting the President, regardless of the veracity of his statements and the negative impact they may have. These incidents appear to be another example of this administration's attempts to silence and undermine important science that is critical in preserving the safety and well-being of millions across the country.

On September 1, 2019, President Trump tweeted about Hurricane Dorian, warning that beyond Florida, "South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama will

most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated by the storm.” Birmingham National Weather Service (NWS) quickly issued a factual tweet stating that the hurricane would remain too far east for Alabama to be impacted. Reporting by the Washington Post indicates that later that day an agency-wide directive issued that was interpreted as a warning to NOAA staff against contradicting the President.

According to the same reporting, a second directive “warning scientists and meteorologists not to speak out” was handed down on September 4, after the President showed a map that had been modified to support his claims that Alabama had been in the hurricane’s path. Finally, on September 6, NOAA officials released a statement attributed to an unnamed spokesperson that supported the President’s claim that Alabama had been at risk and was understood to be a rebuke of the Birmingham NWS office.

In response to these actions, the acting chief scientist at NOAA announced that they will open an investigation as to whether or not NOAA’s response to the President’s tweets violated the NOAA Administrative Order on Scientific Integrity. Taken in their totality, the reported activities are a part of an alarming pattern within this administration, where officials have repeatedly shown a lack of support for the federal scientific community and a willingness to suppress and disregard science in favor of political expediency. The U.S. Departments of Agriculture and the Interior as well as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have taken actions under the direction of the Trump administration to withhold and handicap science and the federal scientists that produce it.

Scientists within the federal government work for the American people, not for private industry or the President’s personal vanity. Individuals and families across the country rely on weather forecasting to determine everything from what they wear each day to the decision to evacuate a home during extreme weather events. As deadly extreme weather becomes more and more common, maintaining public trust in these reports becomes increasingly important. Agency officials should not be sacrificing trustworthy weather reporting for political gain.

As such, we request that, as part of your investigation, you seek information related to the circumstances surrounding these events within NOAA, specifically:

1. Whether Department officials who are not subject matter experts have suppressed or altered—or are actively suppressing or altering—scientific products or communications;

2. Whether Department officials were pressured or explicitly directed by the White House to take the actions reported in Footnote 1 or to overrule career staff;

3. The legality of any actions by Department officials, who are not subject matter experts, who altered or witnessed any alterations to scientific products of communications; and

4. Whether Department officials retaliated or made political decisions that have impacted NOAA's ability to fulfill its mission to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

###