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Report Part Title: Organizing Climate Data in the U.S. Government

Report Title: Managing Climate Change Information in the Next Administration

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Organizing Climate Data in the U.S. Government

Our interviews revealed a broad consensus that the federal government should become more coherent and user-friendly. The responsibility for data collection, analysis, modeling, and accessibility for climate-related decisions now exists in a largely piecemeal fashion across a range of different government entities. The George H.W. Bush administration created the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP) in 1989 to facilitate joint investigation across the government of a changing global environment. The USGCRP's mandate was to bring together the data, insights, and analysis of the 13 or so federal agencies and organizations to cultivate a better understanding of global environmental change. The USGCRP has provided an enormous amount of continuity and coherence to the U.S. government's efforts (partially because its mission is supported by statute) and connectivity between the U.S. government and the international scientific community, but there are well-documented limits to its ability to carry out internal coordination.

The Obama administration tried to further strengthen government coordination and make climate data and information more accessible to the user community through an online data portal and information tools to help federal, state, local, and indigenous communities assess climate risk and make decisions about their adaptation strategies. These past federal efforts to coordinate climate data for action have fallen behind the advancements in data-related technologies—largely driven by private sector initiatives—and reduce today's potential for getting useful information to those who require it for effective decisionmaking.

The most important change is that the private sector has moved from being a customer and recipient of government climate information to a partner in collecting and generating information. Private sector entities now have the capability to launch satellites, collect ground and air-based observations, conduct massive computational exercises necessary for climate system modeling, and link all of this

information with a growing array of consumer and internet-generated climate impact and emissions data—often in more efficient and effective ways than the government.

These developments can improve our ability to connect climate information and users—a core problem for the more government-centric system we have today. By design, private sector data is being driven by consumer demand and need, which has been missing from previous government efforts to connect with user communities. A more user-connected system of climate information requires more collaboration between government and industry than in the past. For this reason, it is important to consider how public and private sector cooperation should be structured to deliver the best results. This is difficult, but there are precedents for White House leadership of a decentralized approach.

The difficulty lies in the need to join a national process for strategy development and oversight to a very decentralized process for research. Responsibility for the climate issue stretches across many different agencies. While we originally considered the idea of a “lead agency,” our guess is that it would face resistance. This makes the White House a logical choice of strategic leadership. Our recommendation would be to locate the new function in the National Economic Council (the Obama-era approach of dual-hatting with the Office of Science and Technology Policy bifurcates responsibility in ways that could be unhelpful). In the next few years, the business and economic aspects of climate change will be a growing focus for operational effort. When the Financial Stability Board created the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) to improve and increase reporting of climate-related financial information and then concluded that financial institutions need to pay greater attention to climate risk to investment, it was an indicator of a growing need.

This function should minimally be headed by an assistant to the president to ensure sufficient authority. We considered the idea of making a new cabinet-level position or council for climate. These ideas deserve further consideration but ultimately depend on the preferences of the president. Whichever direction the administration takes, the key is to ensure sufficient access to the most senior levels of decision-making for climate issues.

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The function should be to develop strategies for several broad problems. National strategies for adaptation and mitigation are obvious starting points, but our discussion revealed other important tasks: building strong relationships with the nongovernmental and business climate community and developing a strategy to ensure that climate data is broadly accessible by those who need it.

Our research suggests that data collection, while it could be improved and made more precise, is not an obstacle. The data available now is sufficient to address policy issues. A more immediate problem is data access. NOAA, NASA, and other agencies have done a good job of acquiring data and making

it publicly accessible, but a large portion of collection and data now resides in the private sector. Coordinating access to this data is a new challenge (putting aside for the moment the problem of access to proprietary data).

The assistant to the president, supported by the National Economic Council (NEC), should chair a National Climate Council with membership from all involved agencies. The input and support of these agencies are essential for developing an effective climate strategy. As we have discussed elsewhere, this strategy can no longer be a research strategy or science based. It must involve diplomacy, national security, and economic policy, and this calls for an expanded representation by agencies outside the traditional research community.

The council should become a focal point for coordination with the many private sector and nongovernmental efforts to collect and assess climate data. It should not attempt to direct them. Climate science is not amenable to a top-down approach, though there is room for improved coordination of effort if only to identify what is being done and what could usefully be expanded. In this, a new White House organization could be usefully linked to climate science collaborative mechanisms such as the USGCRP. The goals should not be to displace or direct these entities. The primary goal of the White House will be to develop an action-oriented strategy with concrete steps to address mitigation and adaptation.

The one tool the White House structure can bring to improve coordination is oversight and approval of climate-related budgets. This is not an easy task, given that these activities are spread among many agencies. But there is an example with cybersecurity in the Obama administration, where after a year-long effort the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was able to identify spending across the government in a way that had not been possible before, giving the White House a strategic view of what was being done and what needed to be strengthened. Management of climate-related federal spending (through a process requiring review and approval by the assistant to the president) has many benefits, but its most important is the ability to create a greater degree of coordination among agencies. This is not something the current, somewhat disparate Federal management of climate activities can do. As one participant put it, “If you want to herd the cats, you need to move the food.”

The issue that an iterative approach does not immediately address is whether there is a more “user-friendly” organization at the state and regional level for federal climate services. Many agencies have regional offices offering different but overlapping services to citizens, local governments, and businesses. An initial step in improving this might be to start with the collocation of agency offices. The experience of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other agencies in the development of regional offices for information sharing related to homeland security is instructive. Agencies may be slow to collocate and share, highlighting the need for political level direction and a White-House led interagency coordination mechanism.

One way to improve organization would be to develop a National Climate Service. This has been long discussed, and there have even been attempts at implementation, but previous efforts have run into opposition that appears—more than anything else—to reflect concerns about the implications for jurisdiction by both agencies and congressional committees. We do not intend to rehash these debates. Instead, we recommend an iterative approach: first, create an assistant to the president who leads an NEC-housed climate council with budget oversight, and then, if considered warranted, a cabinet-level position and a National Climate Service.