

Trump's war on science: how the US is putting politics above evidence

By Emily Holden for the Guardian, Wed 16 Jan 2019

Donald Trump's administration is cutting programs scientists say are proven to protect Americans, from pollution safeguards to teen pregnancy prevention and healthier school lunches, with effects that could last for years.

Experts who have worked in the federal government under Republicans and Democrats say both have sometimes put politics ahead of science but none have done so as blatantly as Trump. And they warn the consequences could continue long into the future. Trump's high-profile denial of manmade climate change has occasionally overshadowed the many other ways his agencies are contradicting established research.

The agriculture department last month rolled back standards for schools to serve more whole grains, less salt and non-fat flavored milk. Department officials claimed schools struggled with the programs because students wouldn't eat healthier foods. But research found the food changes didn't deter students from getting lunch and didn't cause more plate waste. And the healthier food requirements were projected to be effective: one study estimated they could prevent 1.8 million cases of childhood obesity over a decade.

The Trump administration is also cutting short evidence-based grants for teen pregnancy prevention programs, favoring curriculum focused on abstinence instead, despite a large body of research that shows abstinence-only programs don't work. A 2007 evaluation of four federal abstinence programs found that they had no impact on sexual activity or rates of unprotected sex among teens.

Sara Flowers, the vice-president of education for Planned Parenthood, said the majority of the programs previously funded demonstrated young people changed their behavior in at least one of five categories: delaying sex, reducing sexual partners, increasing contraceptive use, reducing rates of sexually transmitted infections or reducing rates of pregnancy.

Climate change and environmental science have also been at the forefront of the battle between science and the Trump administration. Power plant and car standards are being rolled back, as are pesticide restrictions and wildlife protections.

The Trump administration has ignored climate scientists' warnings that rising temperatures and more extreme weather will hurt the US economy and risk lives. The interior department initially sought to remove references to manmade climate change in a report about how sea-level rise might flood national parks.

One of the first major decisions by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was to forego a ban on the pesticide chlorpyrifos, which is associated with developmental delays and health problems in children and has sickened farm workers. Judges ordered the EPA to bar the substance, citing the science that shows it is dangerous. The agency is appealing the case. Trump's disbelief won't stop dangerous climate change. Agency officials have also made fundamental changes to how the federal government weighs environmental and health research.

The former EPA administrator Scott Pruitt barred scientists working with EPA grants from serving on the science advisory panels that help shape policies. Instead, industries and states now have more sway over those boards. The agency also plans to limit what science it will consider, requiring any studies used in the regulatory process to publish confidential participant data.

A Democratic staffer for the House science committee, which plans to investigate the administration's science cuts, said it's been hard to even track all the agency changes. John Bachmann, who advised the controversial Reagan-era EPA appointee Anne Gorsuch Burford on air pollution science, said she would listen to briefings on peer-reviewed data, even as she slashed budgets and eased enforcement.