EPA administrator asked to back up climate claims made on TV with science

Enlarge / Acting Administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency Andrew Wheeler listens as President Donald J. Trump leads a cabinet meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House on July 18, 2018, in Washington, DC.

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In an appearance on CBS News in late March, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler told Chief White House Correspondent Major Garrett that the threat posed by climate change is “50 to 75 years out.”

Now, environmental lobby group Sierra Club has asked the EPA for any scientific evidence that backs up this claim. The group filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the agency, hoping to receive documentation that could back up Wheeler’s claim.

The move is preliminary, but it’s interesting because it follows in the footsteps of a successful challenge by another activist group: PEER, or Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. In 2017, PEER submitted a FOIA request for scientific evidence that could support statements made by former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt on CNBC, where the administrator claimed that carbon dioxide was not known to be

a major factor in climate change.

The EPA stalled for a year, until PEER sued the agency for a timely resolution to its request. The judge overseeing the matter ordered the EPA to turn over any information it had by a court-ordered deadline. The EPA failed to turn up any scientific information supporting Pruitt's claim and ended up turning over just two documents. The first was a 12-page document that Pruitt used to prepare for his CNBC interview, which never mentioned carbon dioxide or climate change once, and the second was a document of Congressional correspondence written by Pruitt where he discussed "his desire to stage a 'Red Team/Blue Team exercise' on climate science," PEER said.

No doubt, the Sierra Club is banking on the fact that it can get a similar result. In its press release, the group says that Wheeler's claim about the distant effects of climate change "directly contradicts the body of reputable scientific evidence, including the Trump administration's own recent National Climate Assessment, authored by scientists from 13 federal agencies including the EPA."

The Sierra Club points to a variety of effects listed in the National Climate Assessment as immediately observable, from flooding and wildfires to damage to military infrastructure and relocation of indigenous communities.

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