

How will Alaskans talk climate change with the Trump administration?

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How do state officials and indigenous leaders in Alaska, where the climate is warming faster than almost any other place in the world, pursue their work in a world where the new president has dismissed climate change as a hoax and has appointed like-minded people to key environmental posts?

Very carefully, it turns out.

That may start with wording. Take the description used for a glacier-shaped bar of soap, a door prize at an environmental conference this month in Anchorage.

“It symbolizes climate change, or what are we calling it now? ‘Ecological transition,’” Kurt Eilo, executive director of the Alaska Forum on the Environment, said when he gave the soap to one of the conference attendees.

Climate change is an important enough priority for the state of Alaska to have been invoked by Gov. Bill Walker in his state of the state address: “Alaska is the only Arctic state in the nation – and we are ground zero for climate impacts,” he said in his address, delivered a month ago.

Discussing the issue with the Trump administration might require a diplomatic approach, said Larry Hartig, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

“You would try to tailor it in a way that you would find common ground,” he said when asked how he would approach the subject with the new administration. “I wouldn’t speculate a

lot on what caused it," he said. "I would focus on: What are we going to do for the communities?"

[Eklutna Glacier, a source of Anchorage drinking water, is disappearing drip by drip]

The same goes for non-fossil-fuel forms of energy, Hartig said.

"There's a lot of no-regret type of opportunities when it comes to renewable energy. We don't want to lose that momentum on that," he said.

Renewable energy development has bipartisan support in Alaska, as costs of diesel fuel and other fossil fuels are especially burdensome in remote parts of the state.

On the international level, Hartig said, he would counsel the Trump administration against pulling out of the Paris climate agreement, which the president has vowed to do.

"We have to recognize that as much as one administration may want to change things in a different direction than the other administration was going, there's the rest of the world out there," he said. If the United States becomes "too much of an outlier" concerning climate change and renewable energy, results could be costly, he said, and that is the message he would try to convey if given an opportunity. "You're being replaced as a world power; you're being replaced as an economic power," he said.

Jim Stotts, president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council of Alaska, is anticipating the need for a tougher approach.

He and his colleagues are concerned about the new person or people who will lead Arctic policy at the Arctic Council and State Department level.

"If it was somebody that was very much a climate-change denier, clearly we would go on the offense and make the case that, yes, there is climate change, and yes, it does affect

the Arctic more than any place in the world,” Stotts said.

So far, though, the Trump administration has not taken any specific steps that would warrant a response from the Inuit Circumpolar Council, Stotts said.

“We haven’t reacted to anything because we haven’t had anything to react to yet,” he said. “I think until something happens, we’re just proceeding as things are normal. We realize they probably won’t be.”

President Donald Trump’s choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, fought the agency when he was Oklahoma attorney general, and environmental group leaders say he has questioned the overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change.

State Rep. Andy Josephson, an Anchorage Democrat, is arguing that the state should take climate action without federal support, if necessary.

He plans to introduce a bill that would revive the state climate-change advisory panel created by Gov. Sarah Palin in 2007 but deactivated under her successor, Sean Parnell – with some new twists, chiefly a mechanism to collect money for climate-mitigation work within Alaska. The bill in the works is an update of legislation Josephson introduced last year; that bill did not move out of committee.

Josephson said he is not optimistic about convincing the Trump administration to take Alaska climate change seriously. “I don’t know of any way” to do that, he said. Instead, he said, the state should take the initiative on the subject, study the work done by the previous climate commission and build on it.

“We don’t need to sit around and the issue is not going to sit around. We can’t afford to wait,” he said. “It’s about us right now and what we can do aside from the federal government and federal intervention.”

One notable Trump administration move was the decision to slash from 34 to 17 the number of EPA officials authorized to attend the recent Alaska Forum on the Environment – an annual gathering in Anchorage that attracts hundreds of participants from across the state. Issues discussed at the forum included climate change impacts in Alaska, security of wild foods needed by rural residents, water quality, marine debris and community waste management.

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