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The politicization of science a damaging trend in North Carolina

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1 of 2



Trying to be heard above the storm on a narrow dune built to protect N.C. 12, coastal geologist Stan Riggs talks about erosion and sea-level rise in 2014. - N&O FILE PHOTO



BY SID SHAPIRO



Recently, two prominent scientific experts resigned from the North Carolina government to protest the state's disregard for scientific input in state policy.

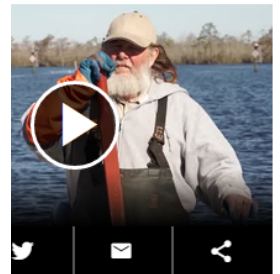


Dr. Megan Davies, a state epidemiologist, resigned to protest state environmental officials' rejection of stringent testing standards to determine the safety of private drinking water wells near coal ash ponds that have leaked dangerous chemicals into the water supply. Earlier, Dr. Stan Riggs, a coastal and marine geologist who helped found a science panel to advise the state on coastal issues, resigned after regulators pressured the panel to use a shorter time horizon to predict how much sea levels would rise on the coast.



State officials deny any wrongdoing, but they rejected the advice of their own scientific advisers on how to proceed, chose instead to pursue less protective policies and issued a news release criticizing a state scientist who favored a more protective policy as "unprofessional."

We have seen this before. In the George W. Bush administration, there were persistent and numerous efforts to disregard scientific input and discredit scientists who made recommendations that were inconsistent with the administration's policy preferences. The disregard for scientific input suggests that political considerations have trumped what science tells us we need to do to effectively protect people from pollution, toxic chemicals, climate change and other dangers.



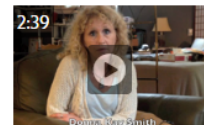
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State testing has revealed cancer-causing chemicals are present in the groundwater adjacent to the millions of tons of coal ash that Duke Energy has stored on the grounds of its electrical generation plants. Although Duke Energy denies that coal ash is the source of the contamination, the state originally warned residents not to drink water from their private wells. But according to a sworn affidavit by Davies in a lawsuit filed against the state, North Carolina withdrew the advisories after the governor's office intervened and told residents that the water was safe to drink.

The state's position is that the water meets the standards of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, but those standards do not include either hexavalent chromium or vanadium, both of which are found in coal ash and private well water in the state. Davies resigned after the state pressured scientists to relax temporary limits created to test the private well water for those two dangerous chemicals, presumably to allow the state to continue to advise residents that the water was safe to drink.

Riggs resigned after the North Carolina Coastal Commission decided to project sea level rise for the next 30 years instead of using the 90-year time horizon that the state used earlier, a result that Riggs described as "political actions" that are "totally unacceptable" from a "scientific perspective."

The earlier 90-year projection had been used as a model by other coastal states. The 30-year timeframe allowed North Carolina to predict a lower level of beach erosion, a result sought by developers and the real estate industry because it would lead to less stringent regulation of coastal development, but that also means it will offer fewer protections to coastal residents. Earlier, the state legislature had ordered scientists to base predictions of sea level rise using historical statistics even though coastal erosion is bound to increase because of climate change. The legislature backed down after being ridiculed for having outlawed consideration of climate change, which led to the adoption of the now-abandoned 90-year projection.

An important role of science is to speak truth to power, but when scientific advice is politically inconvenient, state and national officials are tempted to disregard science to pursue their policy preferences. Whatever short-term gains this science denial may produce, officials risk putting people and the environment in greater jeopardy. Hopefully that is not the result here, but it appears North Carolinians may not be so lucky.

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