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Recommended Citation

Alyssa S. Rosen, Scientists & Librarians Turn to “End of Presidential Term” Web Archive to Safeguard Climate Change Data, Law Lines, Jan. 19, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/1041/>.

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Law Lines

The newsletter of the Law Library Association of Greater New York

Scientists & Librarians Turn to “End of Presidential Term” Web Archive to Safeguard Climate Change Data

Posted on [January 19, 2017](#) by [LawLines](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

By Alyssa S. Rosen, J.D., M.L.S., M.F.A., Reference / Environmental Law Librarian & Adjunct Professor at Pace Law Library

In anticipation of president-elect Donald Trump’s taking office, scientists have been working round the clock to safeguard federal government climate change data. Many academics and librarians share the concern that federal .gov climate data and information, for example from the [EPA](#) and [NOAA](#) websites, will be lost or become unavailable with the transition to the new administration.[\[1\]](#) Fact is, a large percentage of information on federal government servers, including digital federal records, reports, and research, is not protected by any law or agency mandate, and can vanish within days of the arrival of a new president.



Because the loss of this data would be particularly damaging to climate change research (identifying long term trends through years-long data compilation is crucial to scientific climate change analysis), environmental researchers, assisted by librarians, are saving federal government climate data to non-government servers. These concerned researchers are turning to the [End of Term Presidential Harvest 2016](#), a project that began before the 2008 elections, staffed by volunteers at university, government and nonprofit libraries, to preserve valuable and vulnerable information on federal government web servers.[\[2\]](#)

[Sarah Lamdan](#), Associate Law Library Professor at CUNY School of Law, recently took part in an End of Term Presidential information harvesting event. Professor Lamdan underscores the great importance of archiving .gov information, whether environmental in nature or otherwise: “[f]rom an archival standpoint, all of the information is important, because the content on most of these executive .gov websites are going to change in the coming years. From a preservation standpoint, saving everything is a good rule of thumb.” Other efforts to copy and maintain irreplaceable environmental data includes a “guerrilla archiving” event in Toronto that focused on cataloging key federal environmental data [\[3\]](#), and Climate Mirror, a site created by scientists and database experts to house public data scientific information harvested from federal .gov sites. [Climate Mirror](#) is self-described as “part of an ad hoc project to mirror public climate datasets before the Trump Administration takes office to make sure these datasets remain freely and broadly accessible.”[\[4\]](#)

The importance of archiving all governmental environmental website information, even on the state level, has become clearer in the past weeks. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources updated a web page about the environmental quality of the Great Lakes on December 21, 2016, stating that climate change is a matter of scientific debate—replacing sentences that previously attributed global warming to human activities and rising levels of carbon dioxide.[\[5\]](#) As Prof. Lamdan points out, “some of the [.gov] content will change more than other content

[because] the new administration may reform agencies and their goals/mandates, or reverse policies and remove related content from their websites.” Thus, while many types of .gov information may be at risk, climate change information and data is especially so.

In an interesting progression of events this week, the Sierra Club utilized the Freedom of Information Act [\[6\]](#) to assist in protecting these resources—beginning with information housed at the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy. [\[7\]](#) On January 12, the organization filed requests asking those agencies to turn over records, including data on greenhouse gas emissions, so that while the request is pending the information will be preserved online. [\[8\]](#)

After climate data is preserved in a safe location (such as a server in Canada) [\[9\]](#), organizing the information so that it will remain accessible and searchable will be the next goal, as Professor Lamdan describes: “[g]oing forward, we will work to create an indexed, organized system providing access to the information.”

The role of law librarians in safeguarding climate change data reflects how important our knowledge and skills are in the situations where perishable information needs to be preserved and protected.

Further Reading:

[Brady Dennis, *Scientists frantically copying U.S. climate data, fearing it might vanish under Trump*, Chicago Trib. \(Dec. 13, 2016\).](#)

[Eric Holthaus, *Why I’m trying to preserve federal climate data before Trump takes office*, Wash. Post \(Dec. 13, 2016\).](#)

[May Warren, *Toronto group wants to save science and climate change data from Trump with internet archiving*, Metro News \(Dec. 13, 2016\).](#)

[Nicole Mortillaro, *U of T heads ‘guerrilla archiving event’ to preserve climate data ahead of Trump presidency*, CBS News \(Dec. 14, 2016\).](#)

[Weston Williams, *Copying countdown: Trump-wary scientists’ plan to preserve climate data*, Christian Sci. Monitor, \(Dec. 14, 2016\).](#)

[Scientists Race To Preserve Climate Change Data Before Trump Takes Office, in *All Things Considered*, NPR \(Dec. 14, 2016\).](#)

[Abbie Grotke, *Nominations Sought for the U.S. Federal Government End of Term Web Archive*, Libr. of Congress Blog \(Aug. 21, 2016\).](#)

[Wayback Machine Internet Archive for EPA.gov.](#)

[\[1\] Jason Koebler, *Researchers Are Preparing for Trump to Delete Government Science From the Web*, Vice, \(Dec. 13, 2016\).](#)

[2] [Jim Dwyer, *Harvesting Government History, One Web Page at a Time*, N.Y. Times \(Dec. 1, 2016\).](#)

[3] [Toronto ‘guerrilla’ archivists to help preserve US climate data, BBC \(Dec. 15, 2016\).](#)

[4] [Climate Mirror.org \(last visited Jan. 19, 2017\).](#)

[5] [Lee Bergquist, *DNR purges Climate Change from Web Page*, Milwaukee J. Sentinel \(Dec. 28, 2016\).](#)

[6] [5 U.S.C. § 552 \(2012\).](#)

[7] [Memorandum from Craig Segall, Staff Attorney, Sierra Club Env'tl. L. Program to Ingrid Kolb, Chief FOIA Officer, Dep't of Energy, Re: Freedom of Information Act Request Re: LNG Export Studies \(Jan. 22, 2013\).](#)

[8] [Jennifer A Dlouhy, *Fearing Trump Data Purge, Environmentalists Push to Get Records*, Bloomberg Markets \(Jan. 13, 2017\).](#)

[9] [Brewster Kahle, *Help Us Keep the Archive Free, Accessible, and Reader Private*, Internet Archive Blogs \(Nov. 29, 2016\).](#)

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