

USGS

Thousands of webpages are gone. Agency blames search tool

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Access to climate data on the U.S. Geological Survey's website has fallen sharply in recent months, flummoxing some scientists and stoking fears that the Trump administration is nixing information about global warming.

Peter Gleick, a climate scientist and co-founder of the California-based Pacific Institute, made waves when he [tweeted](#) a series of screenshots Sunday evening comparing the search results for "climate change" and the "effects of climate change" on the current USGS website versus an archived version of the site from December 2016. The older version was found using the Wayback Machine website.

In December, a search for "effects of climate change" garnered 2,502 webpages and 144 data sets. Today, users who search for the same phrase receive an error message: "No results found, please refine or try another search."

USGS Public Affairs Officer A.B. Wade pushed back against the idea that the Trump administration has censored the Interior Department's science agency or asked the USGS to remove the information from its website.

She said the discrepancy in search results is due to the USGS website's "notoriously bad" search function, despite a yearslong redesign to make information more accessible.

"I don't even have a way to search within our website all news releases I've done about polar bears," Wade said. "We always go to Google."

Gleick, who said he often works with water-use data housed on the USGS site, was trying to access information previously found under the "effects of climate change" section. He said the malfunctioning search function is preventing scientists and the public from accessing important data.

"I have no idea whether all of the information that was available on the December 2016 site is still there somewhere or not," he said. "It's possible that it's just buried and you find it in a different way. ... But if this is part of their redesign, they're not making it easier, they seem to be making it harder."

Some officials say that kind of discrepancy needs more attention, given President Trump's alternative views on climate science. A bill waiting for the signature of California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) would preserve federal data on climate change on outside websites. The move followed several instances in which information disappeared from the site of U.S. EPA and other agencies ([Climatewire](#), May 8).

Among other things, [S.B. 51](#), introduced by California state Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson (D), would require the California secretary for environmental protection to preserve and make available data "at risk of censorship or destruction by the federal government."

"California is signaling its attempt to limit the effect of the Trump presidency," said Jeff Ruch, executive director of **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**, which helped draft the legislation. "They would literally be the resistance."

According to Ruch, there is no law on the books that prohibits federal agencies from removing data about climate or other issues.

"There is no law that mandates you have to keep your links active," he added.

Officials at USGS have long known that the website's search tool is not functioning correctly, largely due to technical issues associated with the site's content management system, said Scott Horvath, social media lead for the agency.

The search tool is especially bad at pulling up pertinent results when multiple keywords are used. He said another challenge is that the agency's ongoing content migration is being handled by more than 100 people.

"We're hoping to roll out a new search sometime next month and hoping to clean up the results at the same time," he said in an email. "It's [an] ongoing effort and we're well aware of the issues with results needing improvement."

Reporter Hannah Northey contributed.

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