

Trump in Wageningen

Trump is tearing through America's science institutions like an orange bull in a china shop. Climate change can no longer be mentioned and various decrees block research on sex, gender, diversity and inclusivity. Issues that are the subject of research in Wageningen too. Is Trump's influence stretching as far as our campus?

Text Marieke Enter and Dominique Vrouwenfelder

Exit expert

Cathelijne Stoof, Pyrogeographer: 'Yes, I've already felt the effects of Trump's policies. In my PyroLife project, we have a working group on diversity, equity and inclusivity in relation to wildfires. It's an international working group, supported by the WIMEK graduate school, that includes students, PhD candidates and junior and senior researchers from a range of disciplines. Wildfire research is traditionally a field in which women are underrepresented. We analyse such things as the diversity of researchers in the field and we're developing a vision of what a diverse and inclusive "wildfire research and education world" should look like. But the new policies in the US have forced one of our American members, an expert on the topic, to withdraw.'

BAN ON UNIVERSITY PROTESTS

Trump has previously threatened to deport non-American student protesters. Last week, he said on social media that educational institutions would be putting their government funding at risk if they allow illegal protests, and American students would be expelled from university or arrested.

Joost Jongerden, associate professor of Rural Sociology and closely involved with WUR's Palestine pressure group, says in response: 'What we are seeing is higher education and research being made subservient to politics. This underlines the importance of academic freedom: you need to be able to study and discuss issues in academic fields and teach and publish findings without external interference, including from politicians or institution administrators. But what did we see here last year? The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences calling a parliamentary motion for more political interference "encouraging" (the Eerdmans motion, ed.) and rectors stating they would only be prepared to end their institutions' relationships if told to by a minister or the Cabinet. Flagrant violations of academic freedom. If we are worried about what is happening in the US, we should also question the subservience of academia to politics here in the Netherlands.'

Dismay

Robbert Biesbroek, professor of Public Governance & Climate Change Adaptation and a coordinating lead author of the previous IPCC report: 'The US always played an important role in climate research. I am not currently affected much by Trump's decrees but I expect that to change soon. For example, I work a lot with American researchers on projects and research proposals and the funding for this is drying up incredibly rapidly — to their dismay. The same applies to data collection. A lot of climate data has already been taken offline, for example at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). It is also unclear whether new data can be collected. To give another example, the Hurricane Center is only collecting limited data now. That is a problem for the short term but what is worse is that there will be a gap in the long-term data collection, or we will lose historical data series. Perhaps the only bright spot is that at the IPCC meeting in China last week, it was clear the climate remains a key issue for political leaders — despite the absence of the American delegation.'



Illustration Valerie Geelen

Goodbye, data

Alek Gerard-Ursin, Biosystems Engineering Master's student: 'In the last few weeks, I couldn't always access the data I needed for my Master's thesis. One moment the sites were up, and a few hours later they were down again. My thesis is on geoinformatics. I'm analysing the urban layout of Los Angeles – how the city's shape relates to environmental and social issues. Recently, when I was close to a deadline, I wanted to look at the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index. This data is collected by the National Agricultural Imagery Program, a federally funded program. But their sites were down so I couldn't continue.'

'I had to make do with open source databases like OpenStreetMap. But they are scientifically less reliable as anyone can contribute to them. The quality of the data I have now is not as high as I wanted. It's okay as it is "only" for my Master's thesis, but I still want things to be correct.'

Terrifying

Inga Winkler, associate professor of Human Rights in the Law Group: 'For my research project (see page 30, ed.), I intend to do interviews with trans and non-binary activists in the US. But obviously there are huge concerns now about how openly they can speak, about confidentiality and about their safety. It is such a backlash. I don't have answers yet to questions about how to respond to this political shift, or how we can show solidarity and support for the people who are most affected by these policy decisions. The situation is really terrifying.'

Great loss

Margreet van der Burg, professor of gender studies and the lead for WUR's Gender+ Equality Plan: 'Gender equality was a key priority for USAID for years. They had a lot of innovative projects around the world, including ones in agriculture and food security. You could always find loads of information and data on this on their website. Shortly after Trump terminated this federal agency for foreign development aid, all the information was taken offline. You got the message "not available" with an explanation of Trump's decree. It's not an immediate problem for me right now, but it's a great loss for gender studies to no longer have this important source of information — for now at any rate.'