



(Readers of a certain age will understand the reference, and see the resemblance. If that's not you, never mind. But read on for a little less snark and a little more analysis.)

According to [the Washington Post](#), EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt wondered in a television interview Tuesday whether global warming “necessarily is a bad thing,” characterizing as “fairly arrogant” any thought that “we really know what the ideal surface temperature should be in the year 2100, in the year 2018.”

Reading the Post story, I had a disconcerting sense of déjà vu. I'm old enough to remember that George W. Bush's NASA administrator, Michael Griffin, [said much the same thing in 2007](#). Here's why this rerun is worse than the original episode.

I want to emphasize that the problem with Pruitt's statement is neither that we should shy away from discussing the facts (or remaining uncertainties) of global climate change, nor that it violates some clear consensus (scientific or otherwise) on the desirability of any particular climate regime.

Nonetheless, there are at least three important reasons why Pruitt's latest remarks are a dangerous distraction.

First, there's the matter of Pruitt's professional role. Unlike the NASA Administrator, the EPA Administrator has an important and direct role in implementing the Clean Air Act. In 2007, the Supreme Court ruled in [Massachusetts v. EPA](#) that the Act covers greenhouse gas emissions which cause or contribute to "air pollution which may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare." 42 U.S.C. §7601(a)(1). In 2009, [EPA formally concluded](#) that greenhouse gas emissions endanger both public health and welfare. Unless and until he's prepared to formally withdraw that conclusion, and to defend that withdrawal in court, it's inappropriate for Pruitt to speculate in the press that global warming may not be any big deal.

Second, Pruitt's framing of the problem, like Griffin's a decade ago, misses the point. The problem with climate change is not that there is some Platonic ideal of climate we can identify in an objective way that we're in danger of losing. No one is making that claim.

Rather, the problem is the rate of change, because our human communities have been designed, and the non-human communities on which we depend have evolved, in the context of relatively stable storm regimes, sea level, ocean chemistry, disease organism distribution, etc.

This isn't just a touchy-feely tree-hugger argument. Rapid change is problematic without regard to whether the starting or end points are somehow objectively preferable. Thawing of permafrost in Alaska is already [disrupting building foundations and turning roads into washboards](#). Small increases in winter temperatures in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains are already [shrinking the snowpack](#), which serves as our largest (and least expensive) reservoir.

Of course there's no objectively ideal depth of permafrost in Alaska or snowpack in the Sierras, but that's not the point. Because we've constructed our communities and infrastructure on the assumption that conditions would be reasonably stable, rapid change is problematic.

And third, it's important to remember that rapid climate change presents very different problems for wealthy or fortunately located human communities than for poorer, less lucky ones. It's easy for Pruitt to suggest that global warming is no big deal, because even if Oklahoma becomes a less appealing place he's counting on having air conditioning and he'll be a long way from the coast even with substantial sea level rise.

Others are not so lucky. The Pacific Island nation of Kirabati is [trying to plan for a life without its land](#), which will soon be swallowed by rising seas. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees notes that already [roughly 22.5 million people per year are displaced](#) by climate or extreme weather events. Even wealthy nations like the United States are not immune. [Louisiana concedes that many coastal residents are increasingly vulnerable to storms and sea level rise](#). The United States concluded several years ago that [the Native Village of Kivalina, Alaska, should be relocated](#) due to increased risk from storms.

Easy for Scott Pruitt to flash his Alfred E. Newman grin and glibly note that there’s no objectively ideal global climate regime. He should pay more attention, though, to the ways that rapid regime shifts, whether one prefers the starting or ending point, pose serious problems for human and non-human communities.