

Senate Committees consider White House CEQ and OSTP nominees

August 24, 2018

After being nominated for the position of Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) the in June, Mary Bridget Neumayr appeared before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works for a nomination hearing on July 19. Neumayr is currently the CEQ Chief of Staff and has held counsel positions in the Department of Energy, the Department of Justice, and the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. During questioning at the hearing, Neumayr confirmed that advancing environmental protections is the primary responsibility of CEQ and recognized the existence of human-influenced climate change. Neumayr also stated that CEQ had not yet decided whether to proceed with proposing new revisions to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), but generally reiterated the sentiment that NEPA had not been reviewed in 40 years and needs revisions. On August 1, the committee approved Neumayr's nomination along party lines; she now awaits confirmation from the full Senate.

On August 24, the nominees for director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and deputy administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) appeared before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Technology for a nomination hearing. Dr. Kevin Droegemeier, nominated on August 1 for the director of OSTP, is currently the Director Emeritus of the Center for Analysis and Prediction of Storms at the University of Oklahoma and had previously been nominated and confirmed under both the Bush and Obama administration to serve on the National Science Board. Jim Morhard, who was introduced at the hearing and recommended for the position of deputy administrator of NASA by Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KT), has served as chief of staff of the Senate Appropriations Committee and a staff director and is currently the Senate deputy sergeant-at-arms.

During the hearing, both nominees repeatedly emphasized the importance of the keeping science free from political interference and bias. When asked by Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) about climate change, Dr. Droegemeier stated that he was excited to work on the issue through angles such as risk and resilience and suggested collaboration between the fields of climate modeling and weather forecasting as a pathway toward improving uncertainty in climate models. As a part of maintaining U.S. leadership in science, Dr. Droegemeier also promoted efficiently transferring research products into the private sector and removing regulatory burden in science, saying that while some requirements are "extremely important but others are very unnecessary... we need to untie our hands."

Dr. Droegemeier also spoke strongly in favor of promoting STEM education and preventing sexual harassment in the sciences. In his opening statement, Dr. Droegemeier highlighted the importance of an education framework that includes all levels and pathways in creating a "capable and diverse workforce essential to America's future." On the topic of sexual harassment, Dr. Droegemeier voiced support for the National Science Foundation's stance, which includes reserving the right to remove funding from grant recipients and take unilateral action against harassment. Dr. Droegemeier expressed a desire to promulgate a similar approach throughout all agencies involved in R&D.

Sources: Library of Congress; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine; Space News; U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation; National Science Foundation; U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.
