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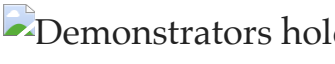
Climate scientists face deluge of public-records requests about fossil-fuel studies

A *Nature* investigation identified more than 30 requests since 2024 to US universities in a campaign questioning climate attribution science.

By James Dinneen

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Demonstrators hold signs and protest outside the US Supreme Court.
Protestors demonstrate outside the US Supreme Court on 5 October, as justices hear a case for which the outcome could determine whether fossil-fuel companies can be held responsible for global warming.Credit: Mehmet Eser / Anadolu via Getty

Last month, a climate scientist working in the University of California system received an unsettling message from her

institution. University officials asked her to submit all correspondence related to a study she had published linking emissions from fossil fuels to environmental harm caused by climate change. The university had received a public-records request from a law firm representing the Patriots Foundation in Des Moines, Iowa, which describes itself on its website as a government watchdog.

It was the fifth such request connected to the organization that the scientist, who requested anonymity to avoid further demands, had received this year.

Heatwaves linked to carbon emissions from specific companies

The requests seem to be part of an expanding effort by groups with ties to the energy industry to discredit findings in the burgeoning field of climate attribution science, which estimates the extent to which extreme weather events, such as floods and heatwaves, are due to climate change. The demands come at a time when attribution science's role in lawsuits against major industrial emitters is growing.

An investigation by *Nature* has identified at least 30 requests for correspondence relating to climate attribution science that researchers in the United States say they have received since 2024. These requests, involving the Patriots Foundation and other groups, have gone to 13 public universities and involved the correspondence of dozens of climate scientists, legal scholars and attorneys. Last month, the news outlet *Politico* reported that it had identified more than 100 open-records requests made to researchers since 2021, related more broadly to lawsuits about damages caused by climate change, rather than just to climate

attribution research. It's unclear how many of these requests overlap.

Neither the Patriots Foundation nor the law firm representing it responded to *Nature*'s queries about the reason for the requests, or about researchers' concerns over them. Another organization that has submitted requests — called Government Accountability and Oversight, based in Sheridan, Wyoming — directed *Nature* to blog posts saying that attribution researchers are activists opposing the fossil-fuel industry and that, if they have the right to do "this sort of lobbying", "the rest of us have a right to see the receipts under state transparency laws".

Climate science is supporting lawsuits that could help save the world

Recipients say that the timing of the requests and the information they ask for suggest that their purpose is to fish for conflicts of interest that could be used to discredit the scientists' findings. A hypothetical example of such a conflict might be attorneys paying a climate scientist to conduct a particular study. The researchers think that the requests might also be attempts to collect information about collaborators and contacts who are not subject to public-records laws, such as scientists and attorneys at private institutions.

Requests of this kind are legal. And *Nature* spoke to several recipients who say they have nothing to hide. They emphasize that communicating with attorneys involved in climate litigation does not bias their work or represent a conflict of interest.

But some say that the volume of requests seems intended to dissuade work on climate attribution, and wastes time and public money. They also say that if scientists know that any e-mail discussion with a colleague might become the subject of an investigation or be taken out of context, that could suppress open scientific debate. “It’s annoying. It’s harassment,” says the University of California climate scientist.

Climate in the court

Studies linking climate change in general to certain weather events have been conducted since 2004[1]. But only in the past several years have researchers begun to use their climate models to estimate how much the emissions from particular companies contributed to specific ‘damages’, such as deaths caused by a heatwave.

Dozens of climate-related lawsuits that are now working their way through the US courts could hinge on whether judges or juries agree that such ‘source attribution’ research is rigorous. That includes a case involving the US energy company Suncor and representatives of Boulder County in Colorado, heard by the US Supreme Court this month. The outcome could determine whether similar lawsuits proceed in state courts.



A wildfire burns and creates heavy smoke along the mountains near Boulder, Colorado. Climate attribution science estimates the extent to which extreme weather events, such as the wildfire in Boulder, Colorado, shown here, are due to climate change.Credit: Michael Ciaglo/Getty

Researchers say that the legal relevance of attribution science has made the field a political target. For instance, a Republican-led committee of the US Congress has investigated a chapter in a reference manual for federal judges that explains attribution science, alleging it represents an improper attempt by climate activists to influence judges. US President Donald Trump, a Republican who is friendly towards the fossil-fuel industry and has called climate change a hoax, weighed in, declaring the chapter "fraudulent, biased, and misleading" on social media.

"Climate attribution is under attack," says Christopher Callahan, a climate scientist at Indiana University Bloomington. In May, he received a public-records request from Government Accountability and Oversight to review his correspondence with eight individuals involved in climate litigation.

'It's totally a surge'

The volume of requests for climate researchers has noticeably increased this year, says Lauren Kurtz at the Climate Science Legal Defense Fund in New York City, an organization that helps scientists to address legal issues in this field. "It's totally a surge," she adds.

Do climate lawsuits lead to action? Researchers assess their impact

Public tax filings show that some of the organizations filing the requests have received funding from, or made payments to, groups connected to industries that could be affected by climate litigation. A tax document shows that in 2024, the Patriots Foundation spent more than

US$35,000 investigating "university research and government research", including payments to the consultancy Concordia Group, located at the same address in Iowa, which has clients in the ethanol fuel industry. And 2024 tax documents show that Government Accountability and Oversight received a substantial share of its funding that year from the Joseph W. Craft III Foundation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was founded by a coal-industry magnate. It is not clear from the public records whether this funding influenced the organizations' decisions to file the requests.

Another non-profit group that has filed several requests, Power the Future, based in Beverly, Massachusetts, advocates on its website for the US Congress to protect the fossil-fuel industry from what it calls "climate shakedown lawsuits". A representative did not respond to a query from *Nature*.

"There is definitely an intimidation piece to this," says Albert Lin, a legal scholar at the University of California, Davis. He received a request in July on behalf of the Patriots Foundation seeking e-mails related to his work on a report about climate attribution, published that month by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM).

Widening scope

Many of the requests that *Nature* identified have focused on the NASEM report. James Hurrell, a climate scientist at Colorado State University in Fort Collins and chair of the committee of 14 independent scientists that produced the report, says he received so many requests after the committee was announced in 2024 that he "quit counting". According to *Nature*'s investigation, the report's authors

received even more requests after it was published this year.

Other requests in 2026 that *Nature* identified have moved beyond the report to probe researchers who have published attribution studies in peer-reviewed journals and who have participated in conferences related to climate attribution and the law.

Not all universities have cooperated with the requests. In August, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor prevailed in a lawsuit brought by Government Accountability and Oversight that sought the communications of a legal scholar who was involved in drafting laws in several states that sought funds from carbon emitters to pay for climate adaptation.

Climate researchers tell *Nature* that they don't plan to stop their work. "All these attacks make me feel like I must be doing something interesting," says the University of California scientist.

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