

## **Massachusetts doesn't have a state climatologist. Here's why that matters.**

Kate Selig, Boston Globe

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It's not often that Massachusetts ranks behind Texas when it comes to climate, but on this matter it does: Massachusetts is one of the few states in the country that lacks a state climatologist.

State climatologists, usually climate scientists with a public-facing role, have taken on more expansive purviews amid intensifying concern about the climate crisis, leading education efforts and supplying data and analysis to an array of state and local entities. Though Massachusetts is still a leader among states when it comes to taking action to mitigate climate change, some experts worry the government's unwillingness to fill the climatologist spot, which has gone vacant since its creation was proposed in 2014, is a missed opportunity.

"It's an embarrassment," said Matthew Barlow, a climate science professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell. "Hundreds of billions of dollars and people's livelihoods are at risk. It's a glaring omission to not have this basic position."

There are already many climate jobs in Massachusetts government, including positions focused on climate adaptation, carbon sequestration, climate leadership, and more. But experts say a state climatologist would still have a distinct function, serving as a single point of contact for government, business, media, and the public, and facilitating the collection and communication of climate data.

Former governor Deval Patrick in 2014 proposed creating a state climatologist position within the energy and environmental affairs office, and the Legislature approved \$200,000 in funding as a part of the 2015 fiscal year budget. The position drew fire for its price tag during a tight fiscal year — the Boston Herald decried it as a "\$100,000-a-year weatherman."

Governor Charlie Baker eliminated funding for the job as a part of his budget powers, which allow the governor to cut funding to executive branch agencies when projected revenue is less than projected spending.

An energy and environmental affairs spokesperson declined to comment on Baker's decision, but noted that the office's two undersecretaries are both focused on cross-government climate leadership.

"The Baker-Polito Administration has taken a robust approach in understanding, responding to and planning for a changing climate," the spokesperson wrote, pointing to the administration's climate hires with backgrounds in science, leadership, and policy, as well as its efforts to develop relationships with academic institutions and climate science organizations.

The spokesperson wrote that the governor has also taken a "nation-leading approach" to addressing climate change, most recently releasing an aggressive plan for cutting greenhouse gas emissions, with the goal of getting to net-zero emissions by 2050.

The climatologist position, though, has remained empty. In 2021, state Representative Kenneth Gordon drew some attention to the issue when he filed legislation to make the position independent of the

executive office and housed within the University of Massachusetts system. The bill is in committee, and Gordon hopes it will emerge in the coming weeks.

Attorney General Maura Healey, the Democratic front-runner in the governor's race, supports filling the state climatologist position, according to a spokesperson for the campaign. The campaign declined to make Healey available for an interview.

“This position will be critical for ensuring that all state agencies and programs use the best science and forward-looking climate data in their planning and decision-making,” the spokesperson wrote, who added that the climatologist would support the Cabinet-level climate chief position that Healey hopes to create.

Republican candidates Geoff Diehl and Chris Doughty declined to comment and did not respond to a request for comment, respectively.

State climatologists have historically acted as stewards of climate data, but the role has evolved as the threat of climate change has grown clearer.

“They are not your grandpa's state climatologist,” said Rick Rosen, a retired climate scientist and Blue Hill Observatory board member.

Today's climatologists serve a range of functions, including conducting public outreach, advising government agencies, and setting up automated weather monitoring stations.

David Robinson, the New Jersey state climatologist, gives 30 to 40 public talks a year, helps run a data-gathering network of 67 stations across New Jersey, and advises groups in the public and private sectors.

“It's like choosing from an a la carte menu,” he said. “This is why I love the job.”

Climatologists can also serve as the go-to person for questions, such as what crops farmers should plant in a warming climate and helping communities understand the climate changes affecting their states, now and into the future.

They can also field inquiries that don't directly involve climate change: “We can't tell you what the weather will be like for your wedding, but we can tell you the typical conditions and the range of possibilities for a given date,” joked John Nielsen-Gammon, the Texas state climatologist and president of the American Association of State Climatologists.

Without a climatologist, there is no clear point of contact for the public, businesses, educators, and policymakers, said Michael Rawlins, associate director of the Climate System Research Center at UMass Amherst.

Rawlins has tried to meet this need by serving as a de facto (and pro bono) climatologist, but there are only so many hours in a day. For example, he's tried to disseminate weather and climate information to the media, and he did about 20 interviews last year. Robinson, the New Jersey climatologist, logged over 150 interviews.

An especially important role for a climatologist in Massachusetts could be shoring up data collection. Barlow, the UMass Lowell expert, has worked on reports for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change and recent Boston climate assessments. He said it is difficult to get good climate information on smaller scales, and for different organizations collecting data to coordinate their efforts. A state climatologist could help by facilitating coordination, putting in place high-resolution observing networks, and reconciling competing datasets.

“Climate is a \$100-billion-plus issue in Massachusetts,” he said. “With all the decisions that need to be made and all the infrastructure and people at risk, you want to be working from the best possible physical science.”

There is some debate over how embedded a state climatologist should be with the executive branch. Under current law, the unfunded Massachusetts climatologist office is a part of the energy and environmental affairs executive office, but some want the climatologist to have more independence.

Most states station the office of the climatologist at public universities, independent of the executive branch, but some, such as California and Georgia, categorize their climatologists as underneath another administrative agency.

Nielsen-Gammon, the Texas climatologist, said placing the climatologist in an executive department can provide them with the agency's resources but can also limit the climatologist to the agency's mission. Placing the climatologist at a university can give them more independence from political forces but fewer opportunities to engage with policymakers.

As a climatologist in a state where some agencies try to avoid even using the word “climate,” Nielsen-Gammon knows the risks of the position being politicized. His office is housed at Texas A&M University, and he said being outside of a state agency gives him more freedom to discuss climate without political interference. He thinks his approach is working: “To my face, people tend to be more complimentary than critical,” he said.