Trump admin ignored its own evidence of climate change's impact on migration from Central America

EXCLUSIVE: An internal report obtained by NBC News showed migration surged from those areas where climate change is hurting crops and farmers.

Sept. 20, 2019, 4:00 AM PDT / Updated Sept. 21, 2019, 6:26 AM PDT

By Jacob Soboroff and Julia Ainsley

GUATEMALA CITY — Research compiled one year ago by Customs and Border Protection pointed to an overwhelming factor driving record-setting migration to the U.S. from Guatemala: Crop shortages were leaving rural Guatemalans, especially in the country's western highlands, in extreme poverty and starving.

An internal report that was circulated to senior Homeland Security officials and obtained by NBC News showed that migration surged from those areas of Guatemala without reliable subsistence farming or wages from commercial farming jobs. More than 100,000 Guatemalans headed north last year, and many more followed in fiscal year 2019, making Guatemala the single largest country contributing to undocumented immigration across the U.S. southwest border this year.

Scientists have said the increase in poverty and food insecurity driving migration are due to multiple factors, one of which is climate change.

The acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees CBP, Kevin McAleenan, has publicly sounded the alarm about Guatemala's food scarcity.

But inside the Trump White House, that message was largely ignored in both policy decisions and

messaging around what should be done to [stem the flow of migrants](). Last October, a month after the CBP report was finalized, President Donald Trump announced he was considering suspending foreign aid to Guatemala, which included money used to mitigate the effects of climate change on small farms.

Guatemalans suffering effects of climate change Sept. 19, 201901:33

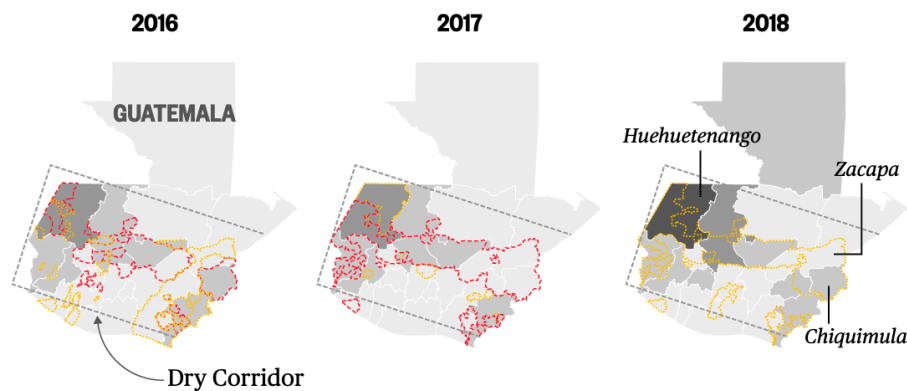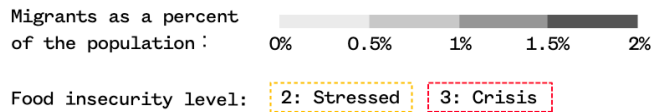"Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were not able to do the job of stopping people from leaving their country and coming illegally to the U.S.," President Trump tweeted in October. "We will now begin cutting off, or substantially reducing, the massive foreign aid routinely given to them."

In April, the administration followed through, undertaking a review of fiscal year 2017 assistance and freezing $170 million in foreign aid slated for Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Over $400 million in fiscal year 2018 foreign aid will also be reprogrammed elsewhere, including outside the Western Hemisphere.

With evidence of a correlation between acute food insecurity and migration in hand, the Trump administration instead focused on an agreement with the government of Guatemala to stem the flow of immigrants through law enforcement means.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

Migration and food availability in Guatemala, 2016-2018

Migrants as a percent of the population: 0% 0.5% 1% 1.5% 2%

Food insecurity level: 2: Stressed   3: Crisis

2016 **2017** **2018**

GUATEMALA

Huehuetenango

Zacapa

Dry Corridor

Chiquimula

Note: Data is per U.S. government fiscal year, which runs October to September; Food insecurity is measured on a scale used worldwide to describe food availability, and ranges from minimal to famine levels.

Source: Data compiled by U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Graphic: NBC News

Law enforcement over food aid

Under the agreement with Guatemala, an outline of which was obtained by NBC News, nearly 90 Americans from Immigration and Customs and Enforcement and CBP are slated to deploy to Guatemala to stop immigrants from other Central American countries from passing through their borders on the way to the U.S. Vehicles and equipment to help Guatemalan law enforcement are also included in the deal, which was outlined in May and solidified in July.

The outline states: "Enhancing border security is sought in order to reduce irregular migration flows; carry out the necessary training to support and enhance criminal investigations; concrete actions to counteract human trafficking and human smuggling; and the interdiction of illicit drug trafficking…" Nowhere in the agreement is food insecurity or foreign aid mentioned.

Under the Trump administration, the United States has funded $150 million through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the federal government's development finance institution, to increase housing opportunities in Guatemala. And an agreement between Guatemala and the Department of Labor was signed in July to ensure that Guatemalan farm workers coming to the U.S. on temporary visas are vetted by the Guatemalan government. But none of those actions take on the impact of climate change and variability on the food supply in Guatemala's highlands.
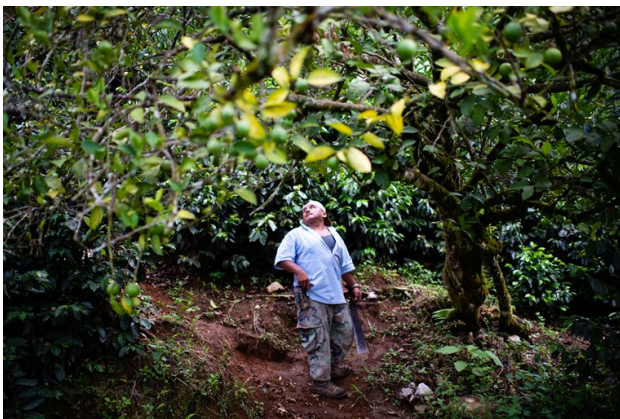
Rodrigo Carrillo Ordonez, 48, walks under a

fruit tree on the property filled with his many coffee plants in May. He said he would be going to the U.S. because he cannot make money to provide for himself and his family with his coffee plants. Sarah L. Voisin / The Washington Post via Getty Images file

Between 2012 and 2018, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) committed around $200 million to rural development programs in Guatemala, according to a USAID document reviewed by NBC News. USAID has operated programs in Guatemala specifically "designed to help to mitigate the impact of drought and coffee leaf rust," a climate change-fueled fungus, according to an agency spokesperson. "We continue to move forward on the President's decision regarding foreign assistance for Guatemala, and have ceased obligating new funds for Guatemala."

The move to freeze funding frustrated those within the administration and outside of it who had been advocating for solutions to the "push factors" of immigration over law enforcement-oriented solutions that crack down on "pull factors," like building a wall to block migrants at the U.S. border.

But a DHS official said the high turnover inside the agency has made officials nervous about keeping their jobs and anxious to please the White House, particularly senior adviser Stephen Miller. "Everyone knows Miller isn't interested in hearing about climate change," the DHS official said.

A senior federal law enforcement official echoed those sentiments: "There is a root cause of migration. But the question presupposes that if you know there's a refugee crisis related to climate change you should do something about it."

Data-based evidence

In an interview with the Washington Post in September 2018, then-CBP Commissioner McAleenan said, "Food insecurity, not violence,

seems to be a key push factor informing the decision to travel from Guatemala, where we have seen the largest growth in migration flow this year."

He based his position largely on interviews conducted by Border Patrol agents with immigrants at the border, where they are routinely asked to be as specific as possible about where they are from. By overlaying that information with data about food insecurity, CBP saw clear evidence of a correlation.

The CBP data made clear that in areas suffering acute food insecurity, like Guatemala's Huehuetenago, Chiquimula and Zacapa departments, the rates of migration were higher than in areas without food shortage concerns.

Scientists say food insecurity can be traced to several factors. A fungus known as coffee leaf rust is rapidly expanding due to climate change throughout the Dry Corridor, a transnational area stretching through Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In so doing, it is killing the region's cash crop, coffee. That, along with global competition plus a years-long drought, has made the plant virtually worthless. Other crops are suffering too, making jobs in commercial farming to supplement income hard to come by as well, leaving entire communities without food to sell, or money to buy food to eat.

"Our research suggests that the main driver of the recent migration in Guatemala is increasing socio-economic vulnerability, said Diego Pons, an applied climatologist with Columbia University's International Research Institute for Climate and Society, part of the Earth Institute. "This was made worse because of a multi-year drought that cannot be explained by climate change alone, but it's a part of a larger complex climate system."

This week, INSIVUMEH, the national meteorological service of Guatemala, announced the launch of the NextGen seasonal forecasting system with the scientific support of the ACToday initiative, led by Columbia World Projects, which Pons said is the type of program that could mitigate some effects of climate change and variability on the lives of Guatemalans. It helps farmers determine when to plant, and it does not rely on U.S. foreign aid.

"NextGen will help make Guatemala a leader in the region when it comes to climate forecasting. This is a historic step forward for the country. It will now be able to provide climate services not just to some, but to all Guatemalans, especially those who depend on rain-fed agriculture for food and income."

While visiting Chiquimula and Zacapa with the World Food Program and Pons in August, NBC News observed villages where children were suffering from malnutrition, including one, Las Sopas, where five children died last year of starvation. Today, the World Food Program, which also does not directly rely on funding from the United States government, is feeding the village's children at the community's school in an emergency response.

"A lot of the kids that are here, come because they know for sure there's going to be food," a local teacher explained. When the children waiting in line for food from the NGO were asked if they knew someone who had left for the U.S., around half raised their hands.

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