

Accountable.US Case Study: The Nomination Of Asmeret Berhe

SUMMARY: The nomination of professor of soil biogeochemistry Dr. Asmeret Berhe to the position of director of the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science took over four times as long as the average Biden DOE nominee in the administration’s first year. Berhe, an immigrant from Eritrea and one of few Black women in the United States in the geosciences, waited 380 days to receive confirmation from the U.S. Senate, while the average Biden DOE nominee’s process took 86 days. Berhe became the first person of color confirmed to lead the Office of Science at the DOE.

At the time of her nomination, organizations in the scientific community highlighted Berhe’s research in soil science, climate change, and political ecology as being consistent with the Biden Administration’s climate policy agenda. In addition to her research on climate change, Berhe’s efforts to advance diversity and inclusion in the sciences aligned with the Biden Administration’s initiatives to foster diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce.

Critics of Berhe’s appointment claimed her nomination was driven by “identity politics,” a conservative talking point that has been used to deny the existence of discrimination and delegitimize qualified people of color, women, and others who are underrepresented in certain fields. Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY) opposed Berhe’s nomination, citing in his remarks an opinion piece from a physicist who called the movement to increase diversity in academia an “intrusion of ideology into science.”

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NOMINATION TIMELINE

Berhe’s Nomination Process Took 380 Days, Over Four Times As Long As The Average Biden Department Of Energy Nominee In The Administration’s First Year

On April 22, 2021, President Biden announced his intent to nominate Dr. Asmeret Berhe as Director of the Department of Energy Office of Science. Berhe was officially nominated on April 27, 2021, and confirmed by

the Senate on May 12, 2022. Berhe’s nomination process took 380 days, a staggering number compared to the 86 days it took the average Biden DOE nominee in the administration’s first year.

Status	Date Nomination Was Received By Senate	Hearing Date	Floor Vote/Confirmation Date	Days From Nomination To Hearing	Days From Hearing To Confirmation	Days From Nomination To Confirmation
Confirmed	4/27/21	8/3/21	5/12/22	98	282	380
DOE Average (As Of 1/14/22)				50.13	53.00	86.00
DIFFERENCE				Received a hearing 47.87 days later than average DOE nominees	Confirmation took 229 days longer than average for DOE nominees	Confirmation took 294 days longer than average for DOE nominees

April 2021: President Joe Biden Nominated Professor Of Soil Biogeochemistry Dr. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe To Serve As Director Of The Office Of Science At The Department of Energy

On April 22, 2021, President Joe Biden Nominated Professor Of Soil Biogeochemistry Dr. Asmeret Berhe To Serve As Director Of The Office Of Science At The Department of Energy (DOE). [White House, [4/22/2021](#)]

Asmeret Berhe Was A Professor Of Soil Biogeochemistry At The University Of California, Merced, Whose Research “Lies At The Intersection Of Soil Science, Climate Change, Global Change Science, And Political Ecology.” “Dr. Berhe is a professor of soil biogeochemistry and the Ted and Jan Falasco Chair in Earth Sciences and Geology at the University of California, Merced. She is also the interim Associate Dean for Graduate Education. Her research lies at the intersection of soil science, climate change, global change science, and political ecology, with an emphasis on understanding the processes that regulate organic matter (carbon) accumulation and loss in soils.” [Geological Society Of America, [5/11/2022](#)]

Berhe Has Noted That She Is One Of Few Black Women In The Geosciences. “As a Black woman in geosciences, especially a full professor who holds an endowed chair position, Asmeret Asefaw Berhe has jokingly called herself a unicorn. ‘That’s how rare it is,’ said Berhe, professor of soil biogeochemistry and Ted and Jan Falasco chair in earth science and geology in the Department of Life and Environmental Sciences at the University of California Merced. ‘There is no reason why in 2022 that should be the case.’” [University of Kansas, [1/27/2022](#)]

- **In 2016, Black Students Earned Less Than 3% Of Doctoral Degrees Awarded In The Physical And Earth Sciences.** “Although Black people make up 13.4% of the U.S. population, Black students earned less than 3% of physical/Earth science doctorates in 2016.” [Stanford University, [2/5/2021](#)]

Berhe Was Born And Raised In Asmara, Eritrea In Northeast Africa. “Originally from Eritrea, Berhe grew up during the country’s war of independence with Ethiopia... Last year, the Carnegie Corporation named her as one of its Great Immigrants, an honor it awards annually to naturalized U.S. citizens for their contributions to “the progress of American society.” [Carnegie Corporation Of New York, Accessed [5/19/2022](#)]

2020: Berhe Was Awarded As One Of The Carnegie Corporation’s “Great Immigrants.” “Originally from Eritrea, Berhe grew up during the country’s war of independence with Ethiopia... Last year, the Carnegie Corporation named her as one of its Great Immigrants, an honor it awards annually to naturalized U.S. citizens for their contributions to “the progress of American society.” [Carnegie Corporation Of New York, Accessed [5/19/2022](#)]

Berhe Has Been Recognized For Her Efforts To Increase Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion In The Geosciences, And For Her Work To Address The Issue Of Sexual Harassment In The Field. “Among her many efforts to ensure more diversity in the science community, Berhe is part of the research team of the National Science Foundation-funded ADVANCEGeo Partnership, which addresses the issue of sexual harassment and other exclusionary behaviors in the earth, space, and environmental sciences.” [Carnegie Corporation Of New York, Accessed [5/19/2022](#)]

Prior To Berhe’s Confirmation, No Person Of Color Had Ever Led The Office Of Science At The Department Of Energy. “Pending her Senate confirmation, she will be the first person of color to lead the Office of Science.” [American Institute of Physics, [4/28/2021](#)]

Berhe's Nomination Was Consistent With The Biden Administration’s Climate Agenda And Its Initiatives To Promote Diversity And Inclusion In The Federal Workforce

Organizations And Leaders In The Scientific Community Said Berhe’s Expertise And Experience In Climate Change Research Aligned With The Biden Administration’s Climate Agenda. “Berhe is a biogeochemist at the University of California, Merced, who researches interactions between organic matter in the soil and environmental shifts such as climate change. This focus aligns with the Biden administration’s climate agenda as well as activities supported through the Office of Science’s Biological and Environmental Research program. In addition to Berhe’s climate expertise, Biden’s announcement also highlights Berhe’s work to foster diversity and equity in the geosciences.” [American Institute of Physics, [4/28/2021](#)]

- **The Former Director Of The Office Of Science Under The Obama Administration Highlighted Berhe’s Background As Consistent With The Biden Administration’s Emphasis On Climate Change, And Calls Her Nomination “Timely.”** “Berhe’s appointment is consistent with the administration’s emphasis on climate change, says Cherry Murray, a physicist at the University of Arizona who served as director of the Office of Science from 2015 to 2017 under the Obama administration. Murray notes that during her tenure, the biological and environmental research program received a proposal to collaborate with the U.S. Department of Agriculture on a project to study microbiome of soil. The project only got funding from DOE, she says, but the effort shows the relevance of soil science to DOE’s mission. ‘This appointment is timely,’ she says.” [Science Journal, [4/23/2021](#)]

Berhe’s Work To Advance Diversity And Inclusion In The Sciences Aligned With The Biden Administration’s Initiatives To Foster Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, And Accessibility In The Federal Workforce. “In addition, Berhe will steer the Office of Science’s ongoing efforts to promote diversity and inclusion at the national labs and among its extramural grantees. Although the office ramped up those efforts during the Trump administration, last fall particular training sessions at some national labs and elsewhere in the government prompted a White House order that led DOE to suspend all diversity training. Biden has since revoked that order.” [American Institute of Physics, [4/28/2021](#)]

- **On His First Day In Office, President Biden Reversed The Trump Administration’s Executive Order That Had Banned Diversity Trainings For Federal Workers.** “On President Biden’s first day in office, he signaled a major shift in the administration’s approach to racial issues, signing an executive order ending the Trump White House’s policies that denied the existence of systemic racism in the United States and ordering agencies to ‘root out’ systemic racism and other forms of discrimination both in the workplace and in their public-facing programs.” [Government Executive, [1/20/2021](#)]

- **Five Months Into His Term, President Biden Issued An Executive Order Establishing Initiatives To Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, And Accessibility Across Federal Agencies.** “Today, President Biden signed an Executive Order to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal workforce. This Executive Order reaffirms that the United States is at its strongest when our Nation’s public servants reflect the full diversity of the American people.” [White House, [6/25/2021](#)]
- **The Research Director At The Union of Concerned Scientists’ Center For Science And Democracy Called Berhe A Phenomenal Pick For The DOE Position For Her Expertise And Her Work To Advance Inclusion In The Sciences.** “Dr. Berhe is an phenomenal pick,’ says Gretchen Goldman, research director in the Union of Concerned Scientists’ Center for Science and Democracy. ‘As a top-notch scientist and leader on inclusion in science, I am confident she’ll effectively lead the Office of Science.’” [Chemical & Engineering News, [4/30/2021](#)]

RIGHT-WING ATTACKS ON BERHE

A Manhattan Institute Fellow Attacked Berhe’s Nomination As Part Of The Biden Administration’s “War On Merit”

Manhattan Institute Fellow And City Journal Contributor Heather Mac Donald Undermined Berhe’s Education And Professional Experience, Claiming That She Benefitted From Her Employer’s “Obsessive Diversity Push.” “It is fitting that Berhe teaches at the University of California, Merced. UC Merced was created as a diversity campus, in the hope of minting more Hispanic graduates with a UC degree. No one advocating for this new institution, located in the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, made the case that California needed more university research capacity. Berhe herself benefited from UC’s obsessive diversity push, having received a President’s Postdoctoral Fellowship, a program for promoting ‘underrepresented minority’ graduate students.” [City Journal, [5/6/2021](#)]

Mac Donald Denied The Existence Of Gender And Race-Based Discrimination In STEM And Attacked Berhe’s Research On The Issue. “Berhe argues that the lack of race and sex diversity in STEM is due to exclusion, rather than to the absence of a proportional number of competitively qualified ‘diverse’ candidates in the hiring pipeline. Her co-authored articles include: ‘Leaky Pipeline vs. Vicious Obstacle Course: metaphors for the persistent exclusion of minoritized scholars from STEM,’ ‘A critical feminist approach to transforming workplace climate in the geosciences through community engagement and partnerships with societies,’ and ‘Hostile climates are barriers to diversifying the geosciences.’ She will undoubtedly further elevate the importance of race and sex as criteria for federal research awards.” [City Journal, [5/6/2021](#)]

Mac Donald Undermined Berhe’s Initiatives To Increase Diversity And Equity In STEM And Said That “The Mission Of Science” Is Not To Be “Representative Of Population Groups.” “Berhe’s Soil Biogeochemistry Lab at UC Merced strives, according to its website, to ‘create a dynamic, diverse, and equitable STEM community that represents the public.’ Scientists do not mirror the public’s demographics, however, thanks to yawning academic skills gaps. Nor is it the mission of science to be representative of population groups; its sole mission is to advance knowledge.” [City Journal, [5/6/2021](#)]

Mac Donald Blamed Lack Of Representation Of Women And People Of Color In STEM On “Yawning Academic Skills Gaps.” “Berhe’s Soil Biogeochemistry Lab at UC Merced strives, according to its website, to ‘create a dynamic, diverse, and equitable STEM community that represents the public.’ Scientists do not mirror the public’s demographics, however, thanks to yawning academic skills gaps. Nor is it the mission of science to be representative of population groups; its sole mission is to advance knowledge.” [City Journal, [5/6/2021](#)]

Republican Sen. John Barrasso Said That Berhe Was Unqualified To Serve As Director Of The Office Of Science, Citing A Wall Street Journal Opinion Piece

That Dismissed Efforts To Increase Diversity In The Sciences As “Identity Politics”

Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY): Berhe’s Background And Experience “Have Little To Do With” The Department of Energy’s Work. “Dr. Berhe has been professor of soil biogeochemistry at the University of California, Merced for over a decade and has focused her research on soil management and sequestering carbon in soil. Her background and experience appear to have little to do with the Department of Energy’s main scientific focus and the scientific community with which it collaborates.” [Senate Committee On Energy And Natural Resources, [8/3/2021](#)]

Sen. Barrasso Opposed Berhe’s Nomination, Citing An Opinion Piece From The Wall Street Journal That Dismissed Efforts To Increase Diversity In The Sciences As “Identity Politics.” “I come to the floor today in opposition to the nomination of Dr. Asmeret Berhe who has been nominated to serve as director of the Office of Science at the U.S. Department of Energy... A May 9, 2021 op-ed in the Wall Street Journal by a physicist whose expertise is theoretical physics has noted: ‘Ms. Berhe’s research program on soil chemistry, exploring the capture of carbon dioxide, is relevant to climate change policy. But her research expertise isn’t in any of the Office of Science’s major programs, and she has no experience as a scientific administrator and minimal experience with the Energy Department itself.’ So not that there is anything wrong with her underlying experience to do other things, but for this specific position, the qualifications just aren’t there. Dr. Berhe is clearly not the right choice to lead the Office of Science.” [Senate Committee On Energy And Natural Resources, [5/10/2022](#)]

- **Physicist Lawrence Krauss, Who Is White And Male, Wrote An Op-Ed For The Wall Street Journal A Connection Between Berhe’s Nomination And Efforts Undertaken By The National Academy Of Sciences To Increase The Diversity Of Its Membership, Calling Such Initiatives “Explicit Bias” Against White Males.** “President Biden has nominated Asmeret Asefaw Berhe, a soil biogeochemist from the University of California, Merced, to lead the Office of Science. Ms. Berhe will be the first black woman to lead the science office, happily lending a more diverse face to science in this country... Down the road from the Department of Energy, the prestigious National Academy of Sciences announced in late April its new class of 120 members, elected from all fields of science... The first female president of the academy, Marcia McNutt, has built a team that has tried over the past few years to shed the NAS’s image of white male elitism. This year in particular has seen a strong push for diversity. Remarkably, almost exactly half of the new members—59 of 120—are women. Nine black scientists are also new members; the NAS says there had never been more than three in a previous class. Lest anyone wonder whether the demographic composition of the new membership was planned, NAS home secretary Susan Wessler made clear that it was... I can’t help but think that this explicit bias might ultimately hurt NAS members who are women, racial minorities or both by feeding the suspicion that qualities other than accomplishment led to their election.” [Lawrence Krauss Op-Ed, Wall Street Journal, [5/9/2021](#)]

The Physicist That Sen. Barrasso Cited In His Opening Statement Has Written Multiple Articles Dismissing Efforts To Increase Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion In The Sciences As “Ideological Encroachment.”

- **Krauss Has Claimed That Efforts To Advance Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion In Academia Discriminate In Favor Of Female And Minority Candidates, Enforce “Ideological Commitments” From Faculty, And Attempt To “Indoctrinate” Students.** “Once entrenched, the DEI offices began to grow unchecked. They became huge and expensive offices not subject to faculty oversight and now work to impose ‘equity’ not only by discriminating in favor of female and minority candidates but by demanding and enforcing ideological commitments from new faculty... All this creates a climate of pervasive fear on campus and shuts down what should be an important academic discussion. After I wrote an article in these pages about the intrusion of ideology into science, I heard from faculty around the country who wrote under pseudonyms that they were afraid of being marginalized, disciplined or fired if administrators discovered their emails. Beyond these fearful faculty members, and talented

would-be scientists who will be dissuaded or excluded from academic research, DEI offices are working to indoctrinate incoming students.” [Wall Street Journal, [10/21/2021](#)]

- **In The Midst Of The Black Lives Matters Protests Following The Murder Of George Floyd In May 2020, Krauss Criticized Institutions That Spoke Out Against Racism In Academia And Called Claims Of Systemic Racism In The Sciences “Spurious.”** “In June, the American Physical Society (APS), which represents 55,000 physicists world-wide, endorsed a ‘strike for black lives’ to ‘shut down STEM’ in academia. It closed its office—not to protest police violence or racism, but to ‘commit to eradicating systemic racism and discrimination, especially in academia, and science,’ stating that ‘physics is not an exception’ to the suffocating effects of racism in American life. While racism in our society is real, no data were given to support this claim of systemic racism in science, and I have argued elsewhere that there are strong reasons to think that this claim is spurious... As ideological encroachment corrupts scientific institutions, one might wonder why more scientists aren’t defending the hard sciences from this intrusion. The answer is that many academics are afraid, and for good reason. They are hesitant to disagree with scientific leadership groups, and they see what has happened to scientists who do. They see how researchers lose funding if they can’t justify how their research programs will explicitly combat claimed systemic racism or sexism, a requirement for scientific proposals now being applied by granting agencies.” [Wall Street Journal, [7/12/2020](#)]

STALLED CONFIRMATION

Berhe’s Stalled Confirmation Process Exemplifies The Magnitude Of Difficulty That Female Nominees Of Color Face Relative To Male And White Nominees

Asmeret Berhe’s Confirmation Process Took 380 Days, Over Four Times As Long As The Average Biden Department Of Energy Nominee In The Administration’s First Year. “A similar trend has played out among Biden’s 12 Energy Department nominees. Male nominees received a hearing within 32.5 days of their nominations, compared to 66 days for female nominees. Male nominees were also confirmed in an average of 84.8 days compared to 131 days for female nominees... Shalanda Baker, who was nominated to head the department’s Office of Minority Economic Impact, and Asmeret Berhe, the nominee to lead the department’s Office of Science, have waited more than 260 days for confirmation since they were nominated last April.” [Salon, [2/14/2022](#)]

After Her Nomination Had Been Stalled For 9 Months, Over 100 Organizations In The Energy Sciences Coalition Wrote A Letter Urging The Senate To Confirm Berhe. “On behalf of the over 100 member organizations in the Energy Sciences Coalition (ESC), we strongly urge you to confirm Dr. Asmeret Berhe as Director of the Office of Science as expeditiously as possible. This includes reporting her favorably out of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and scheduling a Senate vote. Strong leadership for the DOE Office of Science and broader DOE science and technology investments is essential. Both Congress and the Biden Administration are proposing bold new investments in climate, clean energy, emerging technologies, research infrastructure, and a diverse workforce with the DOE Office of Science playing a prominent role, such as the DOE Science for the Future Act, the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act, the Build Back Better reconciliation bill, and the fiscal year 2022 President’s budget request... Given the important role the Director for the Office of Science plays in advancing the country’s science, energy, environment, and national security missions, we strongly urge you to advance her nomination.” [Energy Sciences Coalition, [1/18/2022](#)]

Nominee For Director Of The Office of Minority Economic Impact Shalanda Baker, Who Is A Woman Of Color, Waited Over 406 Days For Confirmation. “A similar trend has played out among Biden’s 12 Energy Department nominees. Male nominees received a hearing within 32.5 days of their nominations, compared to 66 days for female nominees. Male nominees were also confirmed in an average of 84.8 days compared to 131 days for female nominees... Shalanda Baker, who was nominated to head the department’s Office of

Minority Economic Impact, and Asmeret Berhe, the nominee to lead the department's Office of Science, have waited more than 260 days for confirmation since they were nominated last April." [Salon, [2/14/2022](#)]

- **The Senate Voted To Confirm Shalanda Baker On June 7, 2022—406 Days After She Was Nominated.** [Congress.gov, Accessed [6/30/2022](#)]

Berhe Became The First Person Of Color Confirmed To Lead The Office Of Science At The DOE Over One Year After Her Nomination. "Pending her Senate confirmation, she will be the first person of color to lead the Office of Science." [American Institute of Physics, [4/28/2021](#)]

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