

Hundreds of EPA Scientists Report Political Interference Over Last Five Years

Union of Concerned Scientists calls for strengthened protections for federal scientists

WASHINGTON (April 23, 2008)

An investigation of the Environmental Protection Agency released today found that 889 of nearly 1,600 staff scientists reported that they experienced political interference in their work over the last five years. The study, by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), follows previous UCS investigations of the Food and Drug Administration, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and climate scientists at seven federal agencies, which also found significant administration manipulation of federal science. "Our investigation found an agency in crisis," said Francesca Grifo, director of UCS's Scientific Integrity Program. "Nearly 900 EPA scientists reported political interference in their scientific work. That's 900 too many. Distorting science to accommodate a narrow political agenda threatens our environment, our health, and our democracy itself."

The UCS report comes amidst a flurry of controversial activity swirling around the EPA. Congress is currently investigating administration interference in a new chemical toxicity review process as well as California's request to regulate tailpipe emissions. And in early May, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is expected to hold a hearing into political interference in the new EPA ground-level ozone pollution standard. Today's UCS investigation included dozens of interviews with current and former EPA staff members, analysis of government documents, and a questionnaire sent to 5,419 EPA scientists by Iowa State University's Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology. The questionnaire generated responses from 1,586 scientists, but not all of the respondents answered every question. (For the report, "Interference at EPA: Science and Politics at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency," go to www.ucsusa.org/EPAscience.)

Among the UCS report's top findings:

- 889 scientists (60 percent) said they had personally experienced at least one instance of political interference in their work over the last five years.

- 394 scientists (31 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "statements by EPA officials that misrepresent scientists' findings."

- 285 scientists (22 percent) said they frequently or occasionally personally experienced "selective or incomplete use of data to justify a specific regulatory outcome."

- 224 scientists (17 percent) said they had been "directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from an EPA scientific document."

- Of the 969 agency veterans with more than 10 years of EPA experience, 409 scientists (43 percent) said interference has occurred more often in the past five years than in the previous five-year period. Only 43 scientists (4 percent) said interference occurred less often.

- Hundreds of scientists reported being unable to openly express concerns about the EPA's work without fear of retaliation; 492 (31 percent) felt they could not speak candidly within the agency and 382 (24 percent) felt they could not do so outside the agency.

UCS's investigation revealed political interference is most pronounced in offices where scientists write regulations and at the National Center for Environmental Assessment, where scientists conduct risk assessments that could lead to strengthened regulations.

"The investigation shows researchers are generally continuing to do their work," said Dr. Grifo. "But their scientific findings are tossed aside when it comes time to write regulations."

Nearly 100 scientists identified the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the primary culprit. In scientists' responses to an essay question, "How could the integrity of scientific work produced by the EPA best be improved?," OMB took center stage:

- "Currently, OMB is allowed to force or make changes as they want, and rules are held hostage until this happens," said a scientist at the agency's Office of Air and Radiation. "OMB's power needs to be checked as time after time they weaken rulemakings and policy decisions to favor industry."

– "OMB and the White House have, in some cases, compromised the integrity of EPA rules and policies; their influence, largely hidden from the public and driven by industry lobbying, has decreased the stringency of proposed regulations for non-scientific, political reasons," said a scientist from one of the agency's regional offices. "Because the real reasons can't be stated, the regulations contain a scientific rationale with little or no merit."

– "They [OMB] ... have inappropriately stopped agency work that has been in progress for years due to their lack of scientific understanding," said a scientist at the agency's Office of Research and Development.

The UCS investigation also revealed that EPA scientists cannot freely communicate their findings to the media, public or colleagues. Seven-hundred-eighty-three respondents (51 percent) said EPA policies do not let scientists speak freely to the news media about their findings. Scientists also shared anecdotes about being barred from presenting their research at conferences and their difficulties clearing research publication articles with EPA managers.

"Scientific integrity is the bedrock on which the federal science establishment must rest," said Bill Hirzy, an EPA senior scientist and senior vice president of the National Treasury Employees Union, Chapter 280, the union that represents EPA scientists. "Too many EPA scientists have had to fight interference from political or private sector interests and fear retaliation for speaking out."

Previous UCS investigations of other federal agencies show that the problem of political interference is not unique to the EPA. These investigations recently prompted a group of prominent scientists — organized by UCS — to call on the next president and Congress to strengthen protections for all federal scientists. The statement urges them to ensure that federal scientists have the freedom to publicly communicate their findings; publish their work; disclose misrepresentation, censorship or other abuses; and have their technical work evaluated by peers — all without fear of retribution. (For the statement, go to www.ucsusa.org/scientificfreedom.)