

## Interference at the EPA: Science and Politics at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

# Region 4

The Southeast region contains: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Tennessee

People living in the Southeast suffer from respiratory complaints from high levels of ozone and particulate matter pollution, and new and potentially toxic chemicals are entering their lives every day.

An investigation by the Union of Concerned Scientists revealed that the EPA, the agency responsible for keeping our air and environment clean, is in crisis. Based on information gathered from nearly 1,600 EPA scientists, including 45 scientists from Region 4, UCS has found that hundreds of scientists reported political interference in their work, significant barriers to free communication of scientific results, and concerns about the agency's effectiveness.

### EPA Scientists in Region 4 Report High Levels of Interference



#### Interference at EPA Region 4

- **23** scientists personally experienced at least one type of political interference during the past five years.
- **20** scientists knew of “many or some” cases in which political appointees were inappropriately involved in scientific decisions.
- **25** scientists disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “EPA policies allow scientists to speak freely to news media about their research findings.”

#### Region 4 Scientists Need Resources

- **32** scientists disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “my office has sufficient resources to perform its mission.”
- **25** scientists felt that, compared to five years ago, the effectiveness of their division or office had decreased.

#### Region 4 Scientists are Struggling

- **32** scientists felt the morale within their office is fair, poor, or extremely poor.
- **21** scientists disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “the EPA is moving in the right direction.”

**"The political climate that keeps the research from being reported and/or tones down the results, and the political decisions that keep important research from being planned and implemented has increased significantly."**

*-A scientist from Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, replying to the UCS survey*

## Interference in Issues that Affect Region 4

The EPA has allowed political interference to compromise the integrity of scientific issues important to the Southeast, reducing regional air quality and the community's right to know about toxic pollution.

**Ozone** – EPA's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) recommended in 2006 that the ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) be lowered in order to reduce a variety of respiratory health problems which can lead to premature death. Administrator Johnson overruled CASAC and set a weaker primary standard than the committee recommended. In addition, President Bush personally intervened to prevent the EPA from adopting a strong secondary standard, intended to protect long-term public welfare.

**Toxics Release Inventory (TRI)** - TRI requires manufacturers to provide annual reports on their use and release of over 600 toxic chemicals into the environment. Yet in early 2007, the EPA finalized a plan—known as the “TRI Burden Reduction Rule”—to scale back reporting requirements for industries. The new rule raised the amount of pollution an industry could emit before being required to report. It further weakened requirements on releases of chemicals that accumulate in the environment, such as lead, mercury, and dioxin.

A 2007 investigation by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the new rule disproportionately affected low-income and minority communities and the EPA's analysis "masked" the impact of the changes. It also found that the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) set unrealistic deadlines and forced the EPA into specific policy positions.

### In Their Own Words

In their essay responses, scientists from Region 4 focused on problems with political appointees interfering with their work or not respecting their advice. Here is a small selection:

- “Allow the publication of research in peer-reviewed literature without internal review by political appointees.”
- “Remove the political factors.”
- “My management ignores the advice of the people who have many years of experience. If staff questions the decisions management makes, they are told they are being insubordinate and are labeled as troublemakers. There are very serious problems with ethics in the Division management. They don't seem to care what our real mission is!”
- “Allow peer reviewed information and findings to be released to the public.”
- “By keeping politics and undue industry influence out of decision-making.”
- “Politicians and political appointees have gotten mixed up in attempting to change the scientific recommendations; or worse yet, to alter the scientific results. This is an obvious and glaring disservice to the American taxpayers.”
- “Take political appointees out of the decision-making process.”

- EPA Scientists in Region 4 and Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.



This summary was prepared by the Union of Concerned Scientists based on *Interference at EPA: Science and Politics at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency* (UCS, 2008).

For more information or to download a copy of the report, visit [www.ucsusa.org/scientific\\_integrity/](http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity/) or contact us at [rsi@ucsusa.org](mailto:rsi@ucsusa.org).

