

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

Climate Change

Climate change is projected to have profound impacts on public health, agriculture, the economy and even national security. An investigation by the Union of Concerned Scientists revealed that the EPA, an agency involved in climate change research, is in crisis. Based on information gathered from nearly 1,600 EPA scientists, UCS has found that hundreds of scientists report political interference in their work, barriers to free communication of scientific results, and concerns about the agency's effectiveness.



Widespread Interference at EPA

- **889** scientists personally experienced at least one type of political interference during the past five years.
- **783** scientists disagreed or strongly disagreed that EPA policies allow scientists to “speak freely to the news media about their findings.”
- **232** scientists personally experienced frequent or occasional “changes or edits during review that change the meaning of scientific findings.”

Climate Scientists Prevented from Communicating their Research

EPA scientists encounter barriers to speaking freely to their colleagues, the media, and the public about their research. In the fall of 2006, an EPA scientist was barred by EPA management from giving an invited talk at a conference on soil science because the topic involved the politically sensitive subject of climate change. EPA eventually consented and allowed the scientist to give the talk because the conference organizers threatened to observe “twenty minutes of silence” during the time the scientist was scheduled to speak.

Later that year, Cornelia Dean of *The New York Times* reported that Dr. James Titus, EPA project manager for sea level rise, was no longer allowed to publicly discuss issues such as beach erosion, and that all such questions were to be routed to the EPA's press office.

Dr Titus' communications were further restricted in September 2006 when the EPA public affairs office prevented the Earthbeat radio show from speaking to him before a scheduled interview. It was unclear until the day of the interview if it would happen at all. During the interview, Dr. Titus made it clear the topics he could discuss were restricted, and that he wasn't “allowed” to speak about broader global warming issues.

“There are still good scientists producing good science at USEPA. The main problem I see is an administration that considers science only if it supports its agenda. As in other areas, science is used only if it furthers preexisting policy; otherwise it is ignored, marginalized, or suppressed (e.g. climate change).”

-An EPA scientist from a regional office, replying to the UCS survey

Political Appointees Edit EPA Climate Document

In June 2003, *The New York Times* reported that the White House tried to substantially alter the section on climate change in the EPA's Draft Report on the Environment. This report, referencing numerous scientific studies, stated that human activity is contributing significantly to climate change. Investigations have shown that Phillip Cooney, Chief of Staff of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, lead the effort to weaken and discredit the contents of the draft report.

Cooney and other administration officials demanded that the EPA remove reference to a temperature record covering 1,000 years; statements that human activity contributes significantly to climate change; and a statement that "climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment."

In addition, Cooney inserted references to a study funded by the American Petroleum Institute which disputes the scientific consensus on climate change. Cooney stated in an email that "With both the National Academy and the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) holding that the 20th Century is the warmest of the past thousand years, this recent study begins to provide a counterbalance on the point to those two authorities."

According to an internal EPA memo, White House officials demanded so many qualifying words, such as "potentially" and "may," that the result was to insert "uncertainty... where there essentially is none." In the end, the entire climate change section was deleted from the public version of the report. Agency scientists chose this path rather than compromise their credibility by misrepresenting the scientific consensus. The rampant political interference with the report robbed the public of the knowledge and expertise of EPA's scientists.

Ignoring, Deleting, and Distorting Climate Change Science

- President Bush characterized the 2002 U.S. Climate Action Report, which notably broke from the agenda of the White House by explicitly calling human activity a major cause of climate change, as "a report put out by the bureaucracy."
- In September 2002, the White House removed a section on climate change from the EPA's annual air pollution report, even though the topic was covered in the preceding five years.
- The EPA's climate change website was paralyzed and left virtually unchanged from 2002 to 2006. When it finally was updated, it prominently featured a discussion of uncertainties (a common attack method against the scientific consensus) and lacked references to important federal reports.
- Not even the administrator of the EPA was immune to this interference, as Administrator Christine Todd Whitman had an op-ed for *Time* magazine repeatedly edited by a political appointee to unrealistically exaggerate the costs to the United States for participating in the Kyoto Protocol.

For more information about political interference in federal climate change research, take a look at the 2007 UCS report *Atmosphere of Pressure*, online at http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity/interference/federal-climate-scientists.html.



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/EPAscience/ or contact us at rsi@ucsusa.org.

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