

# Freedom to Speak?

## A Report Card on Federal Agency Media Policies

### Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

POLICY

D

PRACTICE

Unsatisfactory

There is no agency-wide media policy for the EPA; we obtained five written policies from various EPA regions and offices in response to our FOIA requests. There is considerable variation among these policies, but none include strong protections for scientists. Instructions not to talk to reporters and to forward all media inquiries to public affairs officials are periodically emailed to EPA employees. A majority of survey respondents did not agree that they can speak freely to the media, and interviews with journalists indicated that the EPA is an especially restrictive agency. **The EPA should create a standard, agency-wide media policy that protects scientific speech.**

**Media Policy.** We obtained media policies from Regions 4, 6, 8, 9, and the agency's National Risk Management Research Laboratory. Region 8 had the most protective policy of the ones we reviewed, but it still had major flaws. For more information, [view the policies and our methodology](#).

#### Quotes from EPA Scientists.

"I have never been so 'handled' as in the past few years—I am usually allowed to communicate with the media—but I now have to get approval, and usually have a press person present—or on the line—even if I am talking to a small college newspaper."

Linda Birnbaum, toxicologist with 18 years of experience at the Office of Research and Development

"I have never heard that there is any 'right' to express personal views. We are always told we are the agency."

"The whole thing about the brakes put on climate information [by EPA] was absolutely shameful. We presented on climate disruptions just about a year ago and didn't feel any limitation on telling the full story, but maybe it was right after the cone of silence was lifted. I was prepared, though, for an artful dodge--if necessary we felt we could look for cover with the state agencies."

"Retaliation would likely be non-official; conversations between managers which would never be recorded."

"I was removed from a project due to scientific disagreement - actually, our expert 3 person team was replaced with a more politically correct scientist."

"I am retiring early due to the intellectual and scientific dishonesty of this agency."

"The gagging of scientists and retaliation against those who speak has caused many of our scientists to leave or retire early. At some point in time, only the passive will be left."



## Examples.

In a separate 2008 survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 783 EPA scientists disagreed that EPA policies allow scientists to “speak freely to the news media about their findings,” and 88 scientists reported that they had frequently or occasionally been directed to “provide incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading information to the public, media, or elected officials.” [Click for more statistics and other information.](#)

Instructions not to talk to reporters and to forward all media inquiries to public affairs officials are periodically emailed to EPA employees. Examples of these directives were issued by Region 5 in 2004 and by the Office of Research and Development in 2006. [Click for more information.](#)

In 2006, the EPA directed media inquiries away from James Titus, the project manager studying sea level rise. He was also no longer allowed to discuss certain issues publicly. [Click for more information.](#)