

Freedom to Speak?

A Report Card on Federal Agency Media Policies

Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)

POLICY



PRACTICE

Unsatisfactory

The FWS does not have a central, official media policy, although we did uncover policies for a few regional offices and a Department of the Interior policy that applies to the FWS and was the basis for the grade to the left. As a result, FWS scientists and even its public affairs officials often rely on local policies transmitted verbally or by email from supervisors. Some scientists felt free to speak with the media and simply notify their press officer; others were restricted from making any media contacts. There is a widespread sense among agency scientists that political appointees have interfered with science-based decisions in recent years and that scientific openness has suffered as a result. **The FWS should create a standard, agency-wide media policy that protects scientific speech.**

Media Policy. The lack of a coherent national FWS policy forces scientists to rely on informal, ad hoc local policies. There is a widespread sense among scientists at FWS that political appointees have interfered with science-based decisions in recent years and, as a result, scientific openness has suffered. For more information, [view the policies and our methodology.](#)

Quotes from FWS Scientists.

“In a workshop where this was discussed, our public affairs staff told us we were not allowed to express our personal views in any media format.”

“I didn't think [expressing my personal views] was an option. We are told that we represent the FWS when we talk about our work activities.”

“I'm thinking about the recent memo that no one (not even polar bear biologists) discuss polar bears while attending conferences or other meetings.”

“All requests from media contacts are to go through our public affairs program lead who will either give the official statement or organize a response through office managers. Biologists are not to give media interviews without prior approval and direction.”

“Requests for specific biologists are given to the Field Supervisor who generally handles [them] by himself or with the help of a public affairs person or supervisor, rarely the appropriate biologist. Routing is highly selective. Rarely does the request get to the person who would give the most knowledgeable or most scientifically credible response.”

“I am not aware that the FWS media communications is corrupt. However, in the past, I have heard that DOI has intervened and I would say, interfered, with such communications.”



“Government managers have become so afraid of a backlash from the administration in Washington DC that they avoid genuine communication and co-opt any communications opportunity for sterilized official viewpoints and upbeat propaganda. The government has lost much of its once-held credibility as purveyors of quality scientific information, and is now widely mistrusted, all due to these 'top-down' communications policies.”

“FWS has so many policies about everything and they are so liberally interpreted, you never know where you stand.”

Examples.

In a separate 2005 survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 174 FWS scientists said they could not openly express concerns in public “about the biological needs of species and habitats without fear of retaliation.” 77 reported having “been directed by USFWS decision makers to provide incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information to the public, media or elected officials.” [Click for more statistics and other information.](#)

A March 2007 FWS email directive instructs its Alaskan employees who request travel not to discuss polar bears, sea ice, or climate change unless they are explicitly authorized to do so. The email and its accompanying sample memorandums outline a formulaic process for travel approval which includes designating an “official spokesman” who understands “the Administration's position on these issues.” [Click for more information.](#)