

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

Region 9

The Pacific Southwest region contains: Arizona, California, Nevada, Hawaii, Guam, Trust Territories, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

People living in the Pacific Southwest suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals and respiratory complaints from high levels of particulate matter pollution from intense agriculture.

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 87 scientists from Region 9, 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 9 Report High Levels of Interference



Interference at EPA Region 9

- **58** scientists personally experienced at least one type of political interference during the past five years.
- **43** scientists knew of “many or some” cases where political appointees were inappropriately involved in scientific decisions.
- **45** scientists knew of “many or some” cases where commercial interests inappropriately induced the reversal or withdrawal or scientific conclusions or decisions.

Region 9 Scientists Need Leadership and Resources

- **66** scientists disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “my office has sufficient resources to perform its mission.”
- **74** scientists agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I have respect for my direct manager or supervisor,” but only **24** agreed or strongly agreed to the same question for the EPA's senior leadership.

Region 9 Scientists are Struggling

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

"Through open communication of scientific results, open discussion of policy options, and transparent decision-making."

-A scientist from EPA Region 9, replying to the UCS survey question "How could the integrity of scientific work produced by the EPA be improved?"

Interference in Issues that Affect Region 9

The EPA has allowed political interference to compromise the integrity of scientific issues important to the Pacific Southwest, reducing protections for regional air and water quality.

Particulate Matter –The EPA’s Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC) recommended in 2005 that fine particulate matter standards be significantly tightened in order to protect people from associated strokes, heart disease, respiratory ailments, and premature death. EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson ignored CASAC’s recommendations and refused to tighten the standard, becoming the first administrator to disregard the panel’s advice in its almost 30 year history. Furthermore, CASAC members protested that the EPA “twisted” and “misrepresented” their conclusions to support Johnson’s decision, and an EPA scientist claimed that “the EPA had incorporated ‘last minute opinions and edits’ by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB)” which closely resembled letters written by trade associations.

Perchlorate – This component of rocket fuel can inhibit the proper functioning of the thyroid gland and has been detected nationally in drinking water, breast milk, and produce. The thyroid gland helps regulate metabolism in adults, and contributes to proper mental development in children. The Department of Defense has long sought to weaken any scientific standard that would mandate cleanup of perchlorate contamination, and has been effective so far in adding layers of additional review to toxicity studies of the chemical. New EPA policies make it easier for polluting agencies like the DOD to delay reports on dangerous chemicals.

In Their Own Words

In their essay responses, scientists from Region 9 focused on problems with political appointees interfering with their work or not respecting their advice. Here is a small selection:

- "The problem is that the senior management does not always allow the scientific results to actually impact a decision; instead, they make politically based decisions."
- "This is the difficult one, but to not have political appointees be the final decision makers for the agency."
- "EPA needs to be an independent agency and the amount of political interference needs to be curtailed. Science and technical information need to be given more weight in decision-making rather than just seen as background information."
- "We need ways of insulating the agency's scientists and science-based reports, regulations, etc., from the interference of political appointees and private sector special interests."
- "More internal EPA scientific work force doing the science needed for the Agency, rather than over 'outsourcing' such research to academic and outside organizations. Also, more funding support is necessary for our own scientists."
- "Keep the politicians out of it."

- EPA Scientists in Region 9



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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