

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

What is new about *Interference at the EPA*?

This study provides concrete evidence for a pattern of interference underlying the many EPA decisions that have made headlines in the past few months and years for suppressing, distorting, or disregarding the best available scientific information. Political interference has been exposed in recent decisions such as the denial of California's right to regulate global warming gases and the setting of the national standard for ozone air pollution.

This report shows that such incidents are only the tip of the iceberg and that political interference is pervasive across the agency. Of the 1,586 scientists who responded, 889 personally experienced at least one incident of inappropriate interference in their work over the past five years.

In addition, to summarizing many of the high-profile examples of political interference in EPA science over the past several years, the report uncovers several previously unreported examples including the following:

- Two EPA scientists were barred by their superiors from presenting their climate change-related research at scientific conferences. In one case, conference organizers protested and threatened to go public, which caused EPA to approve the talk. But in the second case, the scientist was unable to communicate the findings of taxpayer funded research.
- A former EPA scientist describes restrictions on speaking to the media about scientific findings, including one incident where two public affairs officers were present during a phone interview with a reporter.
- Another former EPA scientist describes the complicated and arbitrary process required to obtain clearance for EPA scientific papers to be published in peer-reviewed journals.
- A non-EPA scientist, working with EPA colleagues, was required to submit a scientific paper to an internal EPA policy review that she described as “intimidating.”
- The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has recently moved beyond its traditional role of reviewing and coordinating EPA regulations, and has tampered with the science underlying those regulations in cases involving formaldehyde, particulate matter and ozone air pollution. The OMB has also attempted to dictate the way EPA conducts purely scientific undertakings such as risk assessment and peer review. Nearly one-hundred survey respondents spoke out against this OMB meddling in their essays responses.
- Recent procedures institutionalize interference in an EPA scientific database known as IRIS, which contains toxicology profiles on more than 500 chemicals. The new rules explicitly give other federal agencies—including the Department of Defense—the power to review EPA's science and delay its toxicological findings, despite the fact that such agencies might have significant conflicts of interest due to liability for clean up of pollution.
- Another scientist also reported interference from the OMB in the peer review of an IRIS assessment that served to “downplay the risk posed by the chemical in question.”

Why is the survey in the report not a random survey?

UCS designed this survey to allow as many EPA scientists as possible to voice their concerns about political interference at the agency. The Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology (CSSM) at Iowa State University consulted with UCS on the survey design, conducted the survey and provided initial analysis of the results.

We received responses from 1,586 EPA scientists for a response rate of 29 percent, which is consistent with response rates for other surveys of this kind and represents a significant portion of the EPA's scientific workforce. The respondents were by and large agency veterans with extensive training: two-thirds had been with the EPA for 10 years or more, three-fourths had an advanced degree, and more than 80 percent were at General Service level 13 or higher.

Unlike a random survey, the self-selection of respondents and other unknown selection effects make it difficult to extrapolate our survey findings to the entire group of 6,000-8,000 scientists working at the EPA. In this report, we emphasize the raw numbers of responses to the survey questions and provide percentages as a tool for comparison. We do know from this survey that large numbers of EPA scientists have personally experienced political interference in their work. This number should be zero.

Has political interference impacted human health or the environment?

This interference has weakened protections for human health and the environment, with serious consequences for the American public.

- Political interference has resulted in ambient air quality standards for ozone and particulate matter pollution that do not represent the best available science (as is required by law) and are not sufficiently protective of the public health.
- Suppressed scientific reports on mercury pollution and changes to reporting requirements for toxic releases into communities withhold crucial information that the American public needs to make informed decisions about their health.
- Editing and suppressing scientific documents on climate change has resulted in years of delay in finding a solution to a problem with profound implications for public health, agriculture and even national security.
- Survey results show that the closure of EPA libraries made it more difficult for scientists in affected regions (Regions 5, 6, and 7) to do their jobs.

Is this problem unique to the EPA?

The problem is by no means confined to any one discipline. Science has been distorted, manipulated, and suppressed on dozens of issues, from prescription drugs to endangered species. This interference can take many forms – from censorship and suppression of federal science to dissemination of inaccurate science-based information to the manipulation of scientific advice. The Union of Concerned Scientists has documented scores of examples of such abuses in our online *A to Z guide to political interference in science* (available at www.ucsusa.org/AtoZ) and through our surveys of scientists at nine federal agencies.

Is EPA worse than the other agencies you have surveyed?

Thousands of scientists across nine agencies have expressed concerns for the health, safety, and environment of Americans as a result of the interference and the impact it has had on their work. Each agency has unique patterns of interference. That said, UCS surveys of federal agencies have consistently found large numbers of scientists who:

- fear retaliation for speaking concerns about their agency's mission-driven work outside and even inside the agency;
- are not free to communicate their research findings to the media or the public;
- report their research findings have been changed by political appointees both within and outside of their agency; and
- are disheartened by the level of interference at their agency.

Scientists feel that federal science agencies could be more effective:

- 285 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists could not agree that the USFWS was effective in recovering endangered species.
- 497 scientists at the Food and Drug Administration could not agree that the agency was moving in the right direction.
- 182 climate scientists said the research environment at their agency for climate science was worse than five years ago.

How has the scientific community responded?

As the list of examples of political interference in science has grown, so has concern from diverse groups of Americans, from ordinary citizens to members of Congress to the nation's leading newspapers. Particular concern comes from the scientific community, as scientists know first hand that a healthy respect for independent science has been the foundation of American prosperity and contributed greatly to our quality of life.

In 2004, 62 renowned scientists and science advisors signed a scientist statement on scientific integrity, denouncing political interference in science and calling for a restoration of scientific integrity to federal policy making; the statement was subsequently endorsed by more than 15,000 scientists nationwide. In February 2008, many of the same scientists issued "Scientific Freedom and the Public Good", a document that urges Congress and the next president to create conditions conducive to a thriving federal scientific enterprise. For more information, see www.ucsus.org/scientificfreedom.

What does UCS recommend to restore scientific integrity to EPA science and federal policy making?

These findings highlight the need for strong reforms to protect EPA scientists, make agency decision making more transparent, and reduce politicization of the regulatory process. Congress, the next president, and the next head of the EPA must act to restore independence and scientific integrity to the EPA.

The many forms of political interference in EPA science revealed through our survey, our interviews, and other sources of information require a suite of solutions in five major areas: protecting EPA scientists, increasing agency transparency, reforming its regulatory process, strengthening its scientific advisory system, and depoliticizing funding, monitoring, and

enforcement. Specifically, the following reforms would help reveal and end the abuses of science at the EPA:

- Congress should pass the strongest possible whistleblower law and include specific protections for scientists disclosing interference in their work.
- The EPA should open up its decision-making processes to congressional and public scrutiny to help reveal misuses of science. In particular, the EPA's scientific findings should be fully and freely available to the public.
- The EPA should adopt communications policies that let scientists speak freely to the press and the public about their research, participate fully in scientific societies and streamline clearance procedures for publishing in peer-reviewed journals.
- The White House should not change scientific findings in order to weaken, delay, or prevent new public protections.
- The EPA should review and strengthen how it uses the scientific expertise of its staff and external advisory committees to create policies—especially when scientific input is critical or required by law.
- Problems with funding, monitoring and enforcement also need to be addressed by Congress and the next President to ensure that the EPA is the robust environmental agency that our country needs.