

Freedom to Speak?

A Report Card on Federal Agency Media Policies

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

POLICY

B

PRACTICE

Satisfactory

The DOC media policy that guides both NOAA and NIST is a step in the right direction, although more safeguards are needed to ensure that past abuses do not recur. Commendably, over three-quarters of NOAA survey respondents are aware of free speech protections in the official policy and many report a decline in incidents of censorship. **Still, the DOC policy adds layers of bureaucracy that make routine media communications confusing and burdensome. We recommend the DOC clarify and streamline this policy.**

Media Policy. The Department of Commerce (DOC) issued a new communications policy in 2007 after soliciting its own scientists for input. The DOC policy is an improvement on the 2004 NOAA media policy, which implemented top-down control over all press contacts. For more information, [view the policies and our methodology](#).

Quotes from NOAA Scientists.

“My main concern is that any time you want to communicate with the media you have to fill out long drawn out forms to get clearance. They’re trying to keep a tight hold on communications, which could be a good thing because some people ramble on, but lots of us may have something to say.”

“Official policy is they’d rather have us not give many interviews and refer reporters to HQ instead. They want the national weather service to speak with one voice...They don’t want a loose cannon out there...But in real life you are talking to a reporter you work with regularly, and you have a relationship with them, so they call and you give them your personal opinion.”

“A policy came down a few years ago that we are basically only supposed to talk about the specific data and reports that we have produced. For any interpretation we’re supposed to refer people to private interpretation providers. This is part of a long conflict between the public and private sector where the private sector doesn’t want the government to be competing with them (i.e. if we predict “chance of showers” for the day, and a construction contractor who is planning to pour concrete at 2pm calls to ask if he’s safe to do so and we check the radar and say yes the showers won’t be here til 4:00, that answer is an interpretation of our forecast)...But the line of what we do and don’t talk about is blurred in real life. People like me got into the weather business because we like to help people in real life situations. A lot of us would not be happy just churning out data.”

“Actual policies are probably more liberal than what is realized. This, I believe, is often due to self-censorship where middle or upper managers limit info or "soften" statements out of fear of criticism that is usually unfounded.”



“Media interference was during a time some years ago when the agency had absurd restrictions that most of us ignored. The policy is more liberal now.”

Examples.

In a separate 2006 survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 73 NOAA climate scientists said that NOAA requires public affairs officials to monitor scientists’ communications with the media. Fifteen had experienced fear of retaliation for openly expressing concerns about climate change outside the agency. [Click for more statistics and other information.](#)

NOAA scientists reported that media interviews were granted only on the condition that “minders” be present at or listen in on their interviews. A press officer flew across country at taxpayer expense to monitor two separate interviews with Dr. Pieter Tans, chief scientist at NOAA’s Global Monitoring Division. Government Accountability Project interviews with NOAA scientists in 2006 revealed that at least three other NOAA scientists had interview requests approved on the condition that the same “minder” be present. [Click for more information.](#)

In 2005 and 2006, NOAA public affairs officers routed media requests for interviews away from Thomas Knutson, a NOAA scientist investigating the link between climate change and tropical cyclone activity. The public affairs office directed related questions to Dr. Chris Landsea, another NOAA scientist who, unlike Knutson, contested the connection between hurricane intensity and global warming. A 2006 article by *The New Republic* on these events quoted Jerry Mahlman, former director of NOAA's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, was quoted as saying “I know a lot of people who would love to talk to you, but they don't dare. They are worried about getting fired.” [Click for more information.](#)

In a 2006 interview, senior NOAA research meteorologist Ronald Stouffer estimated that NOAA’s clearance policy—which he nicknames the “pocket veto”—has reduced his domestic media requests (about half of all interview requests he receives) from one every two to three weeks to one every two to three months. In interviews, NOAA’s Knutson also experienced a decrease in media contact, stating that around one-fifth of his 60 to 70 annual media requests, including requests by major national media outlets, “fall through the cracks” due to the additional delays imposed by the new media policies. [Click for more information.](#)

In December 2003, Thomas Karl, director of NOAA’s National Climatic Data Center, coauthored an article in *Science* about human influences on climate change. NOAA had been informed of the pending publication, which included a disclaimer stating, “this article reflects the views of the authors and does not reflect government policy” Nevertheless, media inquiries for Karl were diverted to Dr. Jim Mahoney, a political appointee (now retired) who at the time served as both assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA deputy administrator. [Click for more information.](#)

Richard Wetherald, a research meteorologist at NOAA’s Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, reported that officials have rejected several of his proposed press releases on climate change since 2001, saying that “A decision was made at a high level not to let it out.” [Click for more information.](#)