

# Interference at the EPA: Science and Politics at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Selected Quotes from EPA Scientists

*This document contains selected quotes from EPA scientists who responded to a summer 2007 survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists. For more information about the survey, or to read essays from hundreds of additional EPA scientists, please visit [www.ucsusa.org/EPAscience](http://www.ucsusa.org/EPAscience).*

## Political interference

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There are still good scientists producing good science at USEPA. The main problem I see is an administration that considers science only if it supports its agenda. As in other areas, science is used only if it furthers preexisting policy; otherwise it is ignored, marginalized or suppressed (e.g. climate change).

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

EPA needs dynamic, scientific leadership interested in the well being of the environment and public health. EPA should not be the political agency it has become, the right hand of industry and short economic gain.

*-A scientist from the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response*

Do not trust the Environmental Protection Agency to protect your environment. Ask questions. Be aware of political and economic motives. Become politically active. Elect officials with motives to protect the environment and hold them accountable.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Political considerations should not trump environmental stewardship, and the EPA should not be forced to be silent on the environmental consequences of policy shifts.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Do not allow other entities such as [the White House Office of Management and Budget] to interfere with, or suppress the publication of, EPA's scientific work products. Maintain an open peer review process.... Strengthen whistleblower protections for civil servants.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

EPA needs to be an independent agency and the amount of political interference needs to be curtailed.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Keep political appointees from interfering in scientific decisions or publications. Do not allow political appointees to pressure authors to withdraw from publication or pressure their supervisors to carry out actions that inhibit publication.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

## Openness and Transparency

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Remove the political screening step in science at the Agency. For example, we are not allowed to talk to the press when they call but must refer them to a person in the front office. Often this results in the press not getting the true facts but only those that don't make the Agency look bad.

*- A scientist from the Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances*

The premise should be that all documents (except enforcement related stuff) start out as public documents unless EPA has jumped through a lot of legal hoops to be able retain them.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

The science and risks and benefits need to be honestly and fairly considered. The decisions that are made should be justified and be transparent as to why a decision was made and the risks and benefits be clearly and honestly presented.

*-A scientist from the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances*

I perceive that there is a gag rule that prevents government employees from being allowed to tell the public what they have learned on the job, as well as their job-informed and educated opinions. This work, and knowledge gained during that work, is paid for by the taxpayers.

*-A scientist from the Office of Air and Radiation*

## External Interference

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[The White House Office of Management and Budget] and the White House have, in some cases, compromised the integrity of EPA rules and policies; their influence, largely hidden from the public and driven by industry lobbying, has decreased the stringency of proposed regulations for non-scientific, political reasons. Because the real reasons can't be stated, the regulations contain a scientific rationale with little or no merit.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Currently, [the White House Office of Management and Budget] is allowed to force or make changes as they want, and [EPA actions] are held hostage until this happens.

OMB's power needs to be checked as time after time they weaken rulemakings and policy decisions to favor industry.

*-A scientist from the Office of Air and Radiation*

External scientific advisory processes associated with risk assessment should not incorporate industrial perspectives. In other words, "risk management" should be recognized as a human values problem, and should be more explicitly separated from risk assessment.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

## Scientific Review

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Do not allow political appointees into the process of scientific review. Their job is to make management decisions, not influence the data and information before it is collected and presented.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Improve the peer review process by not making it so cumbersome and by allowing those with real experience to participate.

*-A scientist from the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response*

One of the best current safeguards is review of Agency documents and policies by independent advisory boards including the Science Advisory Board, the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, and the Board of Scientific Counselors. Much EPA work in human health risk assessment is now subjected to Inter-Agency Review by other Federal entities which appear to be more closely aligned with private interests than with the public health community.... Maybe more Congressional oversight would help the Executive Branch straighten its priorities.

*-A scientist from the Office of Research and Development*

## Organizational Improvements

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I have never seen morale at a lower point than we currently have in EPA. Good scientists are leaving because they can no longer put up with all the micro-management that is heaped on them in lieu of effective administrative leadership.

*-A scientist from the Office of Research and Development*

Reduce the power of [the White House Office of Management and Budget] over EPA scientific products. All communications between EPA and OMB during the development of Agency technical products and actions should be preserved for the public record.... In particular, implementation of OMB's risk assessment guidelines would be disastrous.

*-A scientist from the Office of Air and Radiation*

Make sure that there is no way that you can change the science to accommodate a political "need." Currently I think EPA's credibility is in the tank due almost entirely to trying to make the science fit a political need rather than openly admitting that both paradigms exist and then deal with the realities of both politics and science to make the decision.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

This is a young and small agency that has, since its inception, been under enormous pressures. The ability to protect the environment is often also bound by the laws that govern the agency. So, the best way to improve the scientific work at EPA is to ensure that appropriate governing laws are enacted so that with reasonable interpretation the goals of protecting the environment may be met.

*-A scientist from the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances*

EPA is by mandate a regulatory agency charged with protecting human health and the environment. To restore the integrity of scientific work at EPA, political appointees must be removed from all levels within the Agency. Those appointees influence ranges from subtle to direct manipulation of statutory/regulatory actions. Further, the influence of other agencies, particularly [the White House Office of Management and Budget] significantly affects the actions of specific individual program offices, which amounts to direct oversight of almost everything EPA does. These influences, are not limited to manipulation of the results of basic scientific work, but from everything from how vigorously the Agency pursues oversight, weakening guidance and enforcement of statutes/regulations that are detrimental to human health and the environment.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

## Funding and Staffing

**MORE FUNDING!** We do NOT have the resources to meet our mission. My division has seen its resources - in purchasing power- cut over 50% since 10 years ago.

*-A scientist from the Office of Research and Development*

EPA was created and began recruiting scientists in the 1970s; many have retired or will shortly do so. The inability to fill technical vacancies along with the loss of EPA libraries are bleeding down the EPA's technical knowledge base and our ability to provide or share the skills and knowledge that are critical to overall mission success.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Increase the morale of the employees by providing incentives for growth. New hires, at least among scientists in my area are few and far between (no hires in almost 10 years) and the shrinking and aging employee population is more looking forward to retirement than providing ideas that work and will make a difference, because nobody seems to really listen.

*-A scientist from the Office of Prevention, Pesticides, and Toxic Substances*

Strong, independent oversight and protection of "whistleblowers" (real protection - not what is there now) could stem the most damaging practices.

*-A scientist from the Office of Research and Development*

## Other

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As a user rather than producer of technical and scientific information, I find it very frustrating that I have to search out myself research findings and recommendations [of various advisory bodies] that directly affect the management of my programs. By the time the reports filter down to the staff program levels, they have either mutated beyond recognition during intervening manager reviews, or have simply been lost in the fog of the bureaucracy.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

- 1) Improve transparency in government by requiring comments from [the White House Office of Management and Budget] and other agencies on science documents to be made public
- 2) ensure science decisions on conclusions contained in EPA science documents are made by EPA career scientists
- 3) require political appointees to post summary of discussion (including any documents provided) and attendees when they meet with external stakeholders
- 4) encourage accountability in EPA political appointees through Congressional inquiry regarding basis for decisions and role of science versus political considerations in decision making

*-A scientist from the Office of Research and Development*

## Respect for Science

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My opinion of EPA has changed since being here. Specifically, I had believed EPA was more scientific in its approach. Now I realize that EPA has politically driven agendas that sometimes, not always, affects decisions of scientific nature.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Science and technical information needs to be given more weight in decision-making rather than just seen as background information.

*-A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

Managers need to learn to trust the expertise of the technical staff.

*- A scientist from the Office of Water*

Take the politics out of science. Senior EPA leaders and White House officials over the past 6 years have used "junk" science along with biased opinions to make bad environmental decisions. EPA needs to be fully funded to perform its mission.

*-A scientist from EPA headquarters*

The integrity of EPA science could best be improved] by allowing scientists with internationally acknowledged expertise to work and publish in their fields, instead of withholding support and restricting activity.

*- A scientist from the Office of Air and Radiation*

[The integrity of EPA science could best be improved] by staying true to the pollution laws that congress gives us (which means much more frequent revision to reflect the latest science), by leaving less discretion to the executive branch, and by giving the scientific advisory boards more weight to make decisions.

*A scientist from the EPA regional offices*

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