

Surveying the US Department of Agriculture

Scientist Voices under President Trump

HIGHLIGHTS

Scientists conduct work vital to fulfilling the science-based missions of federal agencies charged with protecting Americans' health and safety, yet some federal officials are sidelining science from the policymaking process, endangering the nation's health, economy, environment, and world leadership. How do the scientists working for the federal government experience the state of science in their own agencies? A 2018 survey on the state of science inside the Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) highlights issues regarding science-based decisionmaking processes, including evidence of restrictions on scientists' communication of their work, a reduced workforce, and resources being shifted away from work viewed as politically contentious.

Our nation relies on government science and scientists to protect public health, public safety, and the environment. However, political, ideological, and financial interests often undermine the use of science in federal decisionmaking, harming the public good in the process. While all modern presidents have politicized science to some extent, the Trump administration has escalated the challenge in many areas in both scope and severity.

In February and March 2018, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and the Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology at Iowa State University surveyed more than 63,000 federal scientists in 16 government agencies, including the four agencies that make up the Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA): the Agricultural Research Service, the Economic Research Service, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the National Agricultural Statistics Service. The goal was to gain insight one year into the Trump administration about the state of scientific integrity in the federal government, as well as agency effectiveness and the working environment for its scientists. At the USDA, 3,623 scientists, scientific experts, economists, and statisticians were sent a survey; 258 responded, yielding an overall response rate of 7 percent. Across survey items, the total number of respondents varied. An email from the department's scientific integrity office reminded employees that they could take the survey on their personal time.

The survey of USDA scientists occurred while the department lacked a permanent chief scientist. President Trump's nominee for the role, who had no scientific training or experience, withdrew from consideration in November 2017. No new candidate had been named as of early August, 2018.



Peggy Grab/USDA

In early 2018, scientists from the USDA were surveyed on issues of scientific integrity, funding and resources, censorship, top barriers to science-based decisionmaking, and more.

Many USDA scientists reported a shift of resources away from work viewed as politically contentious.

The results shed light on the level of politicization of science at the USDA, as well as its impact on agency effectiveness and the federal workforce. While the USDA has a strong scientific integrity policy, many respondents report restrictions on their ability to communicate with the media on the agency's vital work. Additionally, many respondents reported that resource allocations are being shifted away from work viewed as politically contentious.

The survey follows and builds on surveys conducted by UCS since 2005 during the administrations of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. Detailed methodology and results from all surveys can be found at www.ucsus.org/surveys.

Scientific Integrity at the U.S. Department of Agriculture

The USDA is essential to personal and societal decisions on keeping Americans safe. Instilling a strong culture of scientific integrity at the USDA is vital for its scientists to fulfill the agency's mission to provide leadership—based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management—on issues related to food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, and nutrition. The USDA's scientific integrity policy clearly outlines procedures for investigating allegations of interference with science. Additionally, the department's scientific integrity officer drafts and releases an annual summary of alleged violations of scientific integrity.

USDA scientists responding to the UCS survey reported restrictions on communicating their work to the public and the media. In addition, respondents reported workforce reductions at their agencies, and most of those respondents indicated that staff losses affected their ability to fulfill the USDA's science-based mission. Many USDA scientists also reported a shift of resources away from offices and programs doing work viewed as politically contentious. In a more positive finding, more than half of the USDA scientists in the 2018 survey said that the USDA provided adequate time and resources for career staff to pursue professional development opportunities. "I think the actions taken by the current administration hinder all agencies' missions," one respondent said. "Science has taken a back seat to political appointees with no scientific background or understanding, and political interests have taken over."

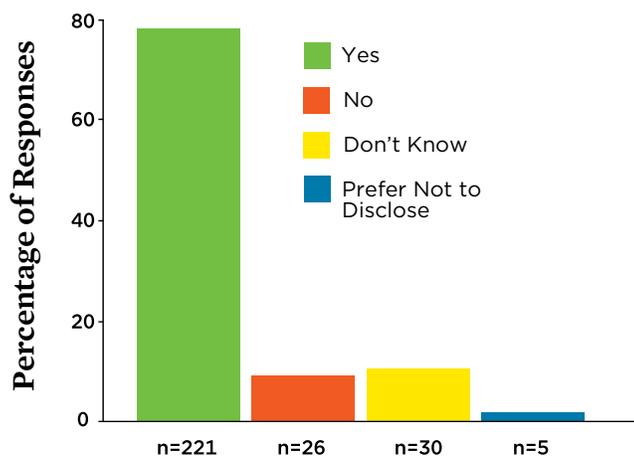
Scientists Speak Out

Anonymous survey respondents from the USDA cited loss of staff among their concerns. Here are some examples of what they had to say:

- "I am much more careful of what I say on the phone, in e-mail, and at meetings than what I was in the past. I will continue to mention evolution, climate change, and the need to control human population growth until I am directly scolded. In the meantime I try to keep my head down and hope to avoid any direct reprisals. The climate certainly has changed and there is fear that our results will be censored or that we could be fired for trying to tell the truth. I will try to stay under their radar until I am closer to retirement."
- "Losing staff at all levels makes it much harder to complete the mission, and losing support staff makes it harder for scientists to effectively conduct outreach to both the general public and interested stakeholders."
- "There have been new travel restrictions that have been placed on us that require us to fill out a 'doodle poll' on any upcoming conference travel to monitor quantity of scientists travelling to conferences. This is on top of the line management approval of conference travel that has always been there. Penalty for not doing the doodle poll is a required memo to the administration explaining the reasons why the new regs were not followed."
- "I have been asked to publish work with a disclaimer statement that the work was conducted 'in my own personal capacity' and that the work 'does not reflect the views of the agency.' At least I was allowed to publish the work in its entirety, but I was told it was too much of a 'hot button' issue for my agency."

FIGURE 1. Communicating with Journalists at the USDA

Are you required to obtain agency pre-approval to communicate with journalists?



Most USDA scientists reported that they must obtain agency pre-approval to discuss their work with journalists.

USDA scientists report restrictions on communicating their work:

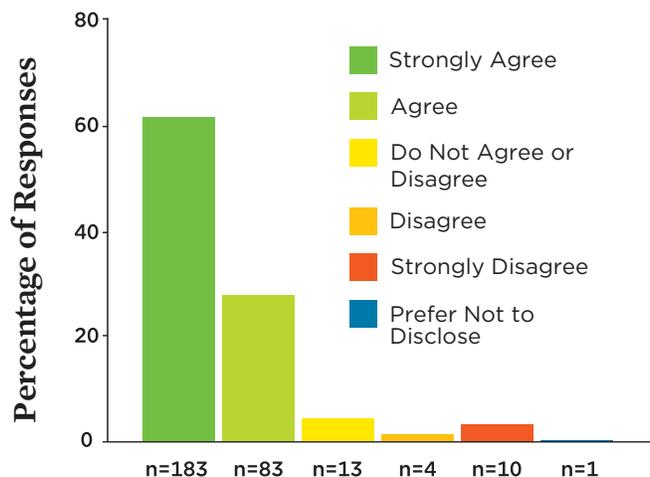
- 78 percent (221 respondents) said they must obtain agency preapproval to communicate with journalists (Figure 1).
- 38 percent (109 respondents) disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if they can speak to the public or the news media about their scientific findings, including at conferences and professional meetings.

USDA scientists report workforce reductions and a shifting of resources away from politically contentious work:

- 90 percent (266 respondents) reported workforce reductions at the USDA (Figure 2).
- Of those, 92 percent (245 respondents) reported that workforce reductions have made it more difficult for the USDA to fulfill its science-based mission.
- 36 percent (105 respondents) agreed that over the past year, resources have been shifted away from programs and offices doing work viewed as politically contentious (Figure 3, p. 4).

FIGURE 2. Workforce Reductions at the USDA

In the last year, I have noticed workforce reductions at my agency due to staff departures, retirements, and/or hiring freezes.



Almost all responding USDA scientists reported workforce reductions.

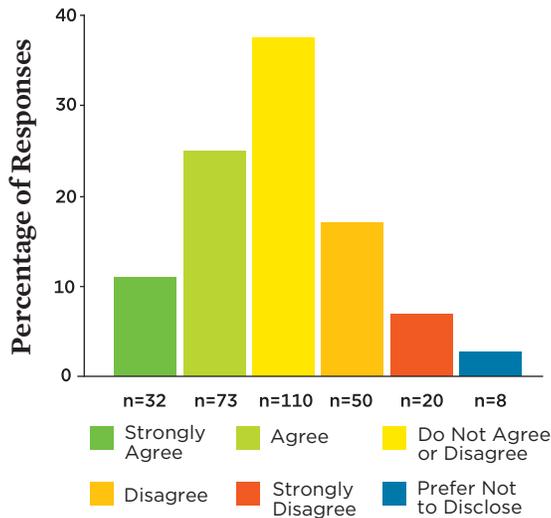
USDA scientists report that their agency affords them with the appropriate time and resources to maintain an academic profile:

- 54 percent (159 respondents) reported having enough time and resources to keep up with professional development activities, including attending conferences and trainings and participating in scientific or professional societies (Figure 4, p. 4).
- 50 percent (144 respondents) said they can publish in peer-reviewed scientific journals regardless of the topic's level of controversy.

Only half of respondents feel they can publish in peer-reviewed journals regardless of the topic's level of controversy.

FIGURE 3. Diversion of Resources at the USDA

Over the past year, I have noticed that resource allocations (e.g., funding, staff time) have been distributed away from programs and offices whose work is viewed as politically contentious.



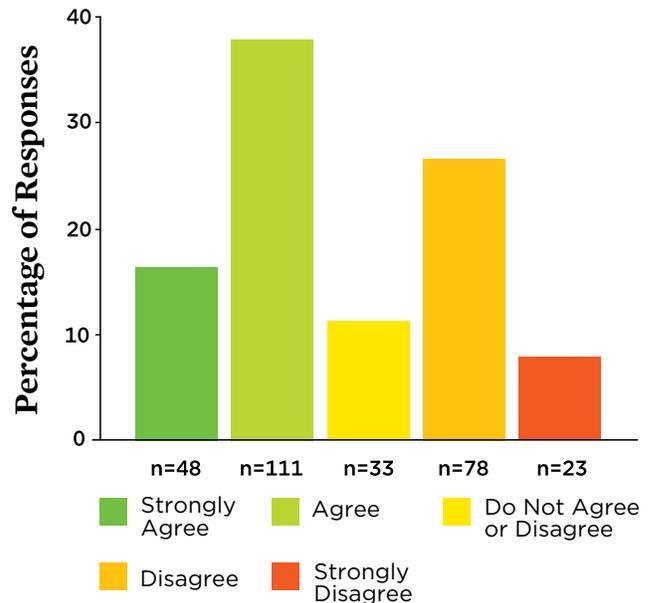
Many USDA scientists reported a shift of resources away from programs and offices doing work viewed as politically contentious.

Recommendations

With respondents noting some restrictions on communicating their work to the news media and public, scientific integrity at the USDA could best be improved by reiterating the agency's policy on the communication of scientific work. Moreover, the department should provide adequate resources to offices and programs

FIGURE 4. Professional Development at the USDA

I am provided adequate time and resources to keep up with advances in my profession, such as attending conferences and trainings, and participation in scientific or professional societies



Most USDA scientists said that the agency provides adequate time and resources for professional development.

conducting important scientific work that informs policies to protect American's health and safety, regardless of whether or not the science is viewed as politically contentious. Additionally, the agency should strive to provide scientists with adequate resources to maintain professional development, ensuring their scientific workforce remains up to date on scientific research.

Union of Concerned Scientists

FIND THIS DOCUMENT ONLINE: www.ucsusa.org/2018survey

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