

Survey says: Science, and government scientists, suffer under Trump

Censorship and self-censorship plague federal experts



By [Joe Davidson](#)

Columnist

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In an administration skilled in myth making, science suffers.

Consider findings from the Union of Concerned Scientists, a non-profit advocacy organization that surveyed thousands of scientific experts in the federal government. The first line of its [new report](#) paints a dismal picture of the place science holds under President Trump:

“A year and a half into the Trump administration, its record on science policy in several agencies and departments is abysmal.”

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There are a couple of bright spots in the administration, however, so all is not lost. But responses from 4,200 scientists in 16 agencies present an alarming record of “studies cancelled, public-facing information altered or removed from websites, and scientists coming under political pressure.” Self-censorship, staffing cuts, low morale and management issues make the problem worse.

“At several federal agencies and departments, scientists reported that political and capacity pressures are compromising their ability to protect public health and the environment,” said Jacob Carter, a co-author of the report and a research scientist with the Union’s Center for Science and Democracy. “In many of the critical science agencies—especially the agencies that handle environmental regulation—scientists reported that they are having trouble doing their jobs because of political interference, staff reductions and a lack of qualified leadership.”

This isn’t a new problem under this president, but it is now more extensively documented. Six months after he took office, the organization issued a report on “[sidelining science](#)” by the administration.

Problems are particularly severe at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Interior Department. The Food and Drug Administration and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration fare better. Despite the generally gloomy findings, there were other bright spots, including 64 percent agreed their agencies follow scientific integrity policies.

“The general adherence to scientific integrity policies at federal agencies is a positive note,” the report says, “yet overall the survey results suggest that inappropriate influences loom over federal science.” Half of those surveyed said “political interests hindered the ability of their agencies to make science-based decisions.” That portion rose to about 80 percent at EPA and Interior’s National Park Service. The influence of political appointees and the White House, according to the report, “presents one of the greatest barriers to protecting public health and responding to environmental threats.”

Elizabeth “Betsy” Southerland, a retired EPA official, has experience with that and with retaliation. The agency tried to [discredit her](#) last year after this column quoted her saying “the administration is seriously weakening EPA’s mission.”

Asked about the study, done with Iowa State University’s Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology, Southerland said “my colleagues in the Office of Water experienced political interference with scientific work while I was there. One example occurred last year when the new political team was writing a rule that proposed repealing the 2015 Clean Water Rule which designated which waters in the U.S. are covered by federal water quality protections under the Clean Water Act. When my office prepared the cost-benefit analyses for that 2015 rule, we derived a substantial monetary benefit for the rule's protection of wetlands...The wetlands monetary benefit was so great

that it exceeded the costs imposed by the rule.

Yet, “without any new data or study or public comment that demonstrated the wetlands monetary benefit was unscientific, the political team directed us to delete that benefit and classify it as unquantifiable,” she continued. “Then they published a rule that proposed repealing the 2015 rule, stating that the costs of the 2015 rule far exceeded the benefits.”

She also complained that before Trump “career scientists were regularly included in decision-making meetings so they could have input to the decisions.” After he took office, “all decisions were made with political appointees only without any career scientists in the room.”

EPA did not respond to Southerland specifically, but an agency statement said it has “one of the strongest Scientific Integrity policies and one of the most robust Scientific Integrity training programs in the federal government” that applies to all employees, including political appointees.

While 18 percent of respondents at climate change agencies said they had been asked not to use the term “climate change” in their work, that segment was more than one-third at EPA and almost half at the National Park Service, according to the survey. Censorship isn’t always directed by political appointees. Sometimes it is self-imposed.

“Across agencies, scientists reported omitting work on issues related to climate change even without explicit orders to do so—in other words, they self-censored their work...” the Union reported. “The possibility that hundreds of government scientists may be choosing to censor their scientific work and its communication is a strong danger sign about the state of science in the federal government.”

Joel Clement, a former Interior policy office director, said several former colleagues told him they “have chosen to remove the term climate change from grant proposals, press releases, and reports.” They “being targeted for harassment by political appointees who seem to be dead-set against evidence-based policy-making – to the detriment of public health and safety and the national interest.” He was transferred before leaving Interior last year and “there is no question in my mind that my reassignment was related to my work on climate change impacts in the Arctic.”

An Interior spokesperson insisted “scientific integrity remains intact at the Department of the Interior. Any assumption otherwise is categorically false.”

Despite denials from the agencies, “hundreds of scientists reported that they’ve had the work they do or the words they use censored,” Carter said. “Hundreds also reported self-censorship to avoid becoming a political target. In some agencies, political appointees are pressuring scientists to avoid controversial topics or silencing scientists’ work if it runs contrary to the administration’s political goals.

“You just can’t do good science in that kind of environment.”

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