Voices of Scientists at the EPA

Human Health and the Environment Depend on Independent Science

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been given the simple yet profound charge "to protect human health and the environment." EPA scientists apply their expertise to protect the public from air and water pollution, to clean up hazardous waste, and to study emerging threats such as global warming. Because each year brings new, potentially toxic chemicals into our homes and workplaces, because air pollution still threatens our health, and because environmental challenges are increasingly complex and global in scope, a strong and capable EPA is more important than ever.

Unfortunately, actions taken by the agency to fulfill its mission have been continually challenged by industry and some political leaders as well. These challenges are too often accompanied by the suppression and distortion of scientific findings underlying the EPA's decisions—to the detriment of both science in general and the health of our nation. While science is not the only consideration in creating good policy (every regulatory agency must balance scientific conclusions with other legitimate considerations), policy makers need access to scientific information of the highest quality in order to make fully informed decisions.

To evaluate how the EPA uses science in its decision making, the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Center for Survey, Statistics & Methodology at Iowa State University distributed a 44-question survey to nearly 5,500 EPA scientists during the summer of 2007. Almost 1,600 scientists responded. The results show an agency under siege: hundreds of scientists reported political interference in their work, significant barriers to the free communication of scientific results, and concerns about the agency's effectiveness.

The EPA's independent scientific assessments are a crucial ingredient in good policy and should never be adjusted to fit a predetermined policy decision. Furthermore, the agency's findings should be freely available to the public; its regulatory process should be more open and transparent and less susceptible to White House interference; and its scientists should be free to report political meddling without fear of retribution. Without these safeguards, the EPA cannot possibly fulfill its worthy mission.

Union of Concerned Scientists
Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions




Findings Are Suppressed and Distorted

Large numbers of EPA scientists reported political interference with their scientific work:

- 889 scientists (60 percent of respondents*) personally experienced at least one type of political interference during the past five years.
- Among agency veterans (more than 10 years of experience at the EPA), 409 scientists (43 percent) said interference has occurred more often in the past five years than in the previous five-year period. Only 43 scientists (4 percent) said interference occurred less often.
- 94 scientists (7 percent) had frequently or occasionally been "directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from an EPA scientific document."
- 191 scientists (16 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "situations in which scientists have actively objected to, resigned from or removed themselves from a project because of pressure to change scientific findings."
- 232 scientists (18 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "changes or edits during review that change the meaning of scientific findings."
- 285 scientists (22 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "selective or incomplete use of data to justify a specific regulatory outcome."

Scientists Are Pressured by Outside Interests

Political pressure on EPA scientists comes from the White House, EPA political appointees, and external commercial interests:

- 507 scientists (42 percent) knew of "many or some" cases in which "commercial interests have inappropriately induced the reversal or withdrawal of EPA scientific conclusions or decisions through political intervention."
- 516 scientists (43 percent) knew of "many or some" cases in which EPA political appointees were inappropriately involved in scientific decisions.
- 560 scientists (49 percent) knew of "many or some" cases in which political appointees at other federal agencies were inappropriately involved in scientific decisions. Nearly 100 respondents identified the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the primary culprit.

Communication Is Discouraged

EPA scientists are not free to communicate their research findings to the media or public:

- 783 scientists (51 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that EPA policies allow scientists to "speak freely to the news media about their findings," and another 556 had no opinion or were unsure (36 percent). Only 197 scientists (13 percent) agreed that the EPA had a policy of free communication with the media.
- 291 scientists (24 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are "allowed to publish work in peer-reviewed scientific journals regardless of whether it adheres to agency policies or positions."
- Hundreds of scientists reported being unable to openly express concerns about the EPA's mission-driven work without fear of retaliation; 492 (31 percent) felt they could not speak candidly within the agency and 382 (24 percent) felt they could not do so outside the agency.
- 299 scientists (24 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "disappearance or unusual delay in the release of websites, press releases, reports or other science-based materials."

Science Goes Unheeded

The EPA does not make consistent use of its staff and advisory committees' scientific expertise:

- 394 scientists (31 percent) personally experienced frequent or occasional "statements by EPA officials that misrepresent scientists' findings."

* Unless otherwise stated, percentages reflect the share of respondents who answered a specific question.

- 719 scientists (47 percent) felt that the agency's determinations occasionally, seldom, or never make use of its scientific staff's best judgment.
- 565 scientists (37 percent) felt that EPA determinations and actions are occasionally, seldom, or never consistent with the scientific findings contained in agency documents and reports.
- 553 scientists (36 percent) felt that expert advice from independent scientific advisory committees is occasionally, seldom, or never heeded and incorporated into regulatory decisions.

Scientists Are Disheartened

EPA scientists reported decreased job satisfaction and concerns about agency effectiveness:

- Twice as many respondents reported a decrease in job satisfaction (670 scientists or 43 percent) over the past five years as those who reported an increase (328 scientists or 21 percent).
- 951 scientists (62 percent) said morale within their divisions was fair, poor, or extremely poor; 570 (36 percent) said morale was good or excellent.
- 696 scientists (45 percent) reported that the effectiveness of their divisions or offices has decreased over the past five years. Only 321 scientists (21 percent) said effectiveness has increased.
- Respondents are evenly split on whether the EPA is moving in the right direction (624 scientists or 40 percent) or the wrong direction (685 scientists or 44 percent).
- 969 scientists (63 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their divisions have sufficient resources to adequately fulfill the agency's mission.
- 555 scientists (36 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the "recent changes and closures in the EPA library system have impaired my ability to do my job." Nearly half of the respondents (48 percent) from Regions 5, 6, and 7—where libraries were closed—agreed or strongly agreed.

EPA Scientists in Their Own Words

When asked how to improve scientific integrity at the EPA, scientists said:

"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 & Emergency Planning

"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 & Radiation

"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 & Toxic Substances

"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 was created and began recuiting 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

EPA Survey Demographics

Surveys were sent to a total of 5,419 scientists distributed among EPA headquarters, all 10 regional offices, and 16 research laboratories across the country; 1,586 scientists completed the survey (a 29.3 percent response rate) and 855 also provided narrative responses. A large majority of respondents were senior scientists at the General Schedule (GS) 13–15 level, three-quarters had an advanced degree, and nearly two-thirds had worked for the EPA for more than 10 years. The Center for Survey, Statistics & Methodology consulted with UCS on the survey design, conducted the survey, and provided initial data tabulation and analysis.

About the Survey

This survey is the fifth in a series designed to assess the level of political interference in science at federal agencies. Past surveys have given voice to scientists at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Division, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, and climate scientists at seven federal agencies and the National Center for Atmospheric Research. View complete survey results, more detailed survey methodology, and excerpts from survey essays at *www.ucsusa.org/surveys*.

Other Recent Reports on the EPA

Government Accountability Office (GAO). 2008. *EPA needs to ensure that best practices and procedures are followed when making further changes to its library network*. Washington, DC.

Government Accountability Office (GAO). 2007. *Toxic chemical releases: EPA actions could reduce environmental information available to many communities*. Washington, DC.

OMB Watch. 2007. *Polluted logic: How EPA's ozone standard illustrates the flaws of cost-benefit analysis in regulatory decision making*. Washington, DC.

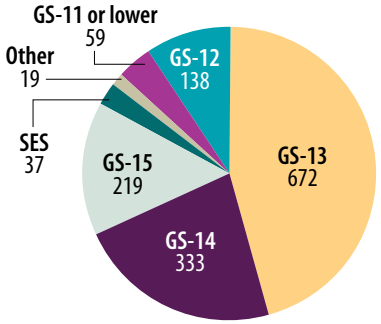
Union of Concerned Scientists. 2008. *Interference at the EPA: Science and politics at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*. Cambridge, MA.

Union of Concerned Scientists. 2008. *Federal science and the public good*. Cambridge, MA.

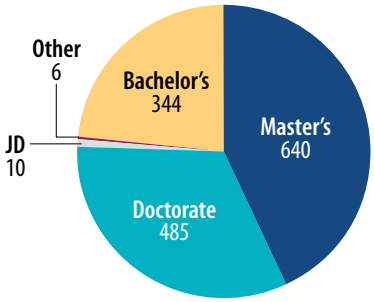
Waxman, H. 2007. *White House engaged in systematic effort to manipulate climate change science*. Washington, DC: House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Charts display the number of survey respondents in each category.

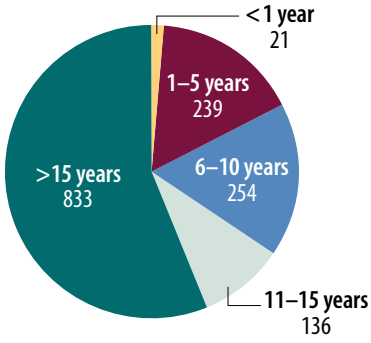
GS Grade Level



Highest Level of Education



Years of Service at the EPA



The Union of Concerned Scientists

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) is the leading science-based nonprofit working for a healthy environment and a safer world.

The UCS Scientific Integrity Program

Policy makers depend on the results of independent research in order to make the informed decisions that keep us and our environment safe and healthy. The UCS Scientific Integrity Program mobilizes scientists and citizens alike to defend science from political interference and restore scientific integrity in federal policy making. To learn more, visit *www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity*.

www.ucsusa.org

Two Brattle Square • Cambridge, MA 02238-9105 • TEL: (617) 547-5552 • FAX: (617) 864-9405
1825 K Street NW, Suite 800 • Washington, DC 20006-1232 • TEL: (202) 223-6133 • FAX: (202) 223-6162
2397 Shattuck Ave., Suite 203 • Berkeley, CA 94704-1567 • TEL: 510.843.1872 • FAX: 510.843.3785