

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Science, like any field of endeavor, relies on freedom of inquiry; and one of the hallmarks of that freedom is objectivity. Now more than ever, on issues ranging from climate change to AIDS research to genetic engineering to food additives, government relies on the impartial perspective of science for guidance.¹

— PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH, 1990

The U.S. government runs on information—vast amounts of it. Researchers at the National Weather Service gather and analyze meteorological data to know when to issue severe-weather advisories. Specialists at the Federal Reserve Board collect and analyze economic data to determine when to raise or lower interest rates. Experts at the Centers for Disease Control examine bacteria and viral samples to guard against a large-scale outbreak of disease. The American public relies on the accuracy of such governmental data and upon the integrity of the researchers who gather and analyze it.

Equally important is the analysis of fact-based data in the government's policy-making process. When compelling evidence suggests a threat to human health from a contaminant in the water supply, the federal government may move to tighten drinking water standards. When data indicate structural problems in aging bridges that are part of the interstate highway system, the federal government may allocate emergency repair funds. When populations of an animal species are found to be declining rapidly, officials may opt to seek protection for those animals under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Given the myriad pressing problems involving complex scientific information—from the AIDS

pandemic to the threat of nuclear proliferation—the American public expects government experts and researchers to provide more data and analysis than ever before, and to do so in an impartial and accurate way.

However, at a time when one might expect the federal government to increasingly rely on impartial researchers for the critical role they play in gathering and analyzing specialized data, there are numerous indications that the opposite is occurring. A growing number of scientists, policy makers, and technical specialists both inside and outside the government allege that the current Bush administration has suppressed or distorted the scientific analyses of federal agencies to bring these results in line with administration policy. In addition, these experts contend that irregularities in the appointment of scientific advisors and advisory panels are threatening to upset the legally mandated balance of these bodies.

The quantity and breadth of these charges warrant further examination, especially given the stature of many of the individuals lodging them. Toward this end, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) undertook an investigation of many of the allegations made in the mainstream media, in scientific journals, and in overview reports issued

¹ Remarks to the National Academy of Sciences, April 23, 1990. Online at bushlibrary.tamu.edu/papers/1990/90042301.html.

from within the federal government² and by non-governmental organizations.³ To determine the validity of the allegations, UCS reviewed the public record, obtained internal government documents, and conducted interviews with many of the parties involved (including current and former government officials).

FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATION

1. There is a well-established pattern of suppression and distortion of scientific findings by high-ranking Bush administration political appointees across numerous federal agencies. These actions have consequences for human health, public safety, and community well-being.

Incidents involve air pollutants, heat-trapping emissions, reproductive health, drug resistant bacteria, endangered species, forest health, and military intelligence.

2. There is strong documentation of a wide-ranging effort to manipulate the government's scientific advisory system to prevent the appearance of advice that might run counter to the administration's political agenda. These actions include: appointing underqualified individuals to important advisory roles including childhood lead poisoning prevention and reproductive health; applying political litmus tests that have no bearing on a nominee's expertise or advisory role; appointing a non-scientist to a senior position in the president's scientific advisory staff; and dismissing highly qualified scientific advisors.

3. There is evidence that the administration often imposes restrictions on what government scientists can say or write about "sensitive" topics.

In this context, "sensitive" applies to issues that might provoke opposition from the administration's political and ideological supporters.

4. There is significant evidence that the scope and scale of the manipulation, suppression, and misrepresentation of science by the Bush administration are unprecedented.

RESTORING SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY TO FEDERAL POLICYMAKING

This report calls on the president, Congress, scientists, and the public to take immediate steps to restore the integrity of science in the federal policymaking process.

The president should immediately request his science advisor to prepare a set of recommendations for executive orders and other actions to prohibit further censorship and distortion of scientific information from federal agencies, and put an end to practices that undermine the integrity of scientific advisory panels.

Congress should ensure that this administration and future administrations reverse this dangerous trend. To this end, Congress should: hold oversight hearings to investigate and assess the allegations raised in this report; ensure that the laws and rules that govern scientific advisory appointments require that all appointees meet high professional standards, and protect against the domination of such panels by individuals tied to entities that have a vested interest at stake; guarantee public access to government scientific studies and the findings of scientific advisory panels; and re-establish an organization able to independently assess and provide

² For instance, see House Committee on Government Reform, Minority Staff, Special Investigations Division, "Politics and Science in the Bush Administration," August 2003.

³ For instance, see Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, "Preserving Core Values in Science," 2003; Defenders of Wildlife, "Sabotaging the Endangered Species Act: How the Bush Administration uses the judicial system to undermine wildlife protection," December 2003.

guidance to Congress on technical questions that have a bearing on public policy, similar to the former Office of Technology Assessment.

Scientists must encourage their professional societies and colleagues to become engaged in this issue, discuss their concerns directly with elected repre-

sentatives, and communicate the importance of this issue to the public, both directly and through the media. And the **public** must also voice its concern about this issue to its elected representatives, letting them know that censorship and distortion of scientific knowledge are unacceptable in the federal government and must be halted.