

# Scientific Communications

## Ensuring public and policymaker access to independent science

One of the most important functions of scientific agencies is to communicate the results of scientific research to the public in an accurate and timely manner. However, political appointees are increasingly censoring scientific information, delaying or restricting public access to that information, and deterring federal scientists from communicating openly with the public and the press. Suppression of science can lead to poor policymaking and individual decisions when policymakers and the public are unable to access the best available scientific information regarding threats to public health and safety. Moreover, the increased reliance on remote work due to COVID-19 accelerates the need for sensible records retention and related policies.

### Background

There is no better situation to demonstrate the importance of access to independent scientific information than the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the White House task force sidelined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from communicating about the pandemic, information about testing kits, disease prevalence, and the need for more protective equipment became considerably less available. Contradictory statements from administration officials confused the public and politicized understanding of the threat, reducing public compliance with science-based safety recommendations. The CDC stopped holding press conferences, and the White House instead became the primary source of information. Information was removed from CDC and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) websites without explanation, making it more difficult for communities to prepare. This has unequivocally worsened our response to the virus, with catastrophic consequences.

Recent surveys of scientists across federal agencies find that thousands of experts experience significant censorship and self-censorship on issues ranging from climate change to toxic chemical exposure. Federal websites have been scrubbed of scientific information on environmental and public health

topics. Federal experts were prohibited from speaking about gun violence and the projected path of Hurricane Dorian. And new restrictions were put in place at agencies including the US Geological Survey, increasing political control over scientists' communications.

Federal agencies' current scientific integrity and related policies are uneven, and enforceability depends on political leadership. Government experts and the public deserve clarity on how scientists' findings and advice are shared, and a presumption that scientific conclusions should be shared absent a compelling reason to keep them private.

### Recommendations for the Next Presidential Term

- 1. In the Inaugural Address, affirm that the era of government censorship of scientists and scientific information is over, and pledge specific steps to restore scientific integrity and public faith in government decisions. (immediately)**

Current and potential federal scientists look for evidence that their work is valued in decisionmaking and will reach the public. Early signals will be critical to quickly and efficiently rebuild federal scientific capacity.

- 2. Require federal agencies to develop media policies that allow scientists to share their expertise publicly without political vetting or approval. (first 100 days)**

Several federal agencies, including the Department of Energy and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, have media policies that encourage open communication. The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy should ensure all federal agencies and departments that create or utilize scientific information have policies that meet minimum transparency standards.

**3. Invite the public to identify high-priority information needs. (first 100 days)**

Agencies must have sufficient data to make informed decisions. Each agency should ask its employees and the public what information collection and monitoring needs in line with the agency's mission are not being met. With this feedback, the government should develop plans to fill any gaps on public health and environmental threats and develop plans to make this information publicly accessible and easy to find and use.

**4. Support strengthened scientific integrity legislation. (first year)**

The Scientific Integrity Act requires agencies to develop effective, enforceable scientific integrity policies that will prevent—and establish consequences for—censorship of scientists and political interference in their work. It has bipartisan support and is endorsed by scores of public-interest organizations. The administration should signal support for any legislation that improves scientific integrity, and act swiftly to implement any law that has passed that protects scientists from political interference in their work. Regardless of what protections exist in statute, the White House should ensure that agencies develop and implement more consistent and effective scientific integrity policies (see the memo “Agency Scientific Independence” for additional details).

**5. Implement a Presidential Task Force on Implementation of Electronic Records Management. (first year)**

Empower the task force to develop robust policies to ensure proper records retention and uniform standards for online access to federal scientific information. Direct the chief technology officer to work with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to enhance digital repositories of scientific information, making scientific data and publications easily accessible to the public. Records retention rules, digitization guidelines, and model contracts should be revised to ensure consistent access to both original and digital records in nonproprietary formats (see the memo “Data Collection and Dissemination” for additional details).

## Additional Resources

- ***Presidentially Appointed Science and Technology-Related Positions*** (from the 1992 book *Science and Technology Leadership in American Government* by the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine)
- ***Mediated Access: Transparency Barriers for Journalists' Access to Scientists and Scientific Information at Government Agencies*** (2015 report from the Union of Concerned Scientists)

## ENDORSED BY

Californians for Pesticide Reform / Center for Biological Diversity / Center for Reproductive Rights / Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) / Climate Science Legal Defense Fund / Environmental Protection Network / Equity Forward / FracTracker Alliance / Friends of the Earth / Government Accountability Project / Government Information Watch / Greenpeace USA / Inland Ocean Coalition / Jacobs Institute of Women's Health / Milwaukee Riverkeeper / National Children's Campaign / National Federation of Federal Employees / National Freedom of Information Coalition / National Parks Conservation Association / National Women's Health Network / Ocean Conservation Research / Oceana / Oceanic Preservation Society / Open the Government / Pesticide Action Network / Power to Decide / Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility / Revolving Door Project / Society of Professional Journalists / United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) / Union of Concerned Scientists / Virginia Association of Biological Farming