

Restoring Strength to Scientific Agencies

Ensuring federal agencies that use and produce science can perform effectively

As the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us, the well-being of our nation relies on the strength and effectiveness of federal agencies that produce and use science. To meet challenges effectively, agencies must have strong leadership and be able to attract and retain highly qualified career staff members for science-related positions. To meet those goals, the administration must fill open positions quickly, undo recent actions that have harmed recruitment and retention, and create robust budgets. These recommendations have strong support from science, public health, human rights, environmental, and good-government organizations.

Background

US federal agencies have long attracted a workforce of people dedicated to using their skills and training for the public good, but several years of inadequate budgets coupled with recent harmful actions have harmed their ability to carry out their missions. *Morale has dropped*, and a *2018 survey of federal scientists* found concerns about workforce cuts, political interference, and agencies' ability to fulfill their missions. The Trump administration has *failed to fill nearly half of scientific leadership positions*. Staffing at agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *suffered under a 2017 hiring freeze* that contributed to the nation's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across agencies, *political appointees have cut off collective bargaining or unilaterally imposed new contracts* that reduce protections and benefits—for example, by slashing telework options that help attract and retain a diverse group of workers who may live far from worksites and have health conditions or family responsibilities, and whose importance for reducing virus transmission has become clear. *Nearly 1,600 workers left the Environmental*

Protection Agency during the first 18 months of the Trump administration, and the agency recently announced it is *suspending enforcement of environmental laws during the pandemic*. Months after the abrupt relocation of two US Department of Agriculture (USDA) research agencies, *nearly two-thirds of the positions at the Economic Research Service were unfilled*. Such departures represent a tremendous loss of institutional knowledge and expertise, which take time to rebuild.

The administration should fill scientific leadership and civil service positions with well-qualified individuals who reflect this country's diversity, and propose budgets that will allow scientific agencies to function effectively and improve morale. Preventing “burrowing,” the process by which political appointees convert to civil service positions that should be based on merit, can also help ensure these positions are filled by the best candidates.

Recommendations for the Next Presidential Term

1. Promptly nominate and appoint qualified individuals to scientific leadership positions. (first 90 days)

Send nominations to the Senate for all scientific leadership positions that require confirmation, and make offers to qualified individuals for political appointments that do not require confirmation. Ensure nominees and appointees reflect the diversity of the nation and have relevant qualifications and a demonstrated respect for the role of science in decisionmaking. Priority positions to fill include those at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

2. Propose robust budgets. (first 30 days, and by February each year)

Instruct agencies to ensure their budget requests include the following:

- Enough full-time-equivalent positions to conduct their scientific work effectively.
- Sufficient resources to respond to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests within the statutory deadlines.
- Career development, including attendance at scientific conferences.
- Workplace environments and equipment conducive to long-term morale as well as health and safety.

3. Fill vacancies for science positions promptly. (first 30 days)

- Issue an executive order instructing agencies to fill vacancies promptly and appoint chief science officers (see the memo “Agency Scientific Independence,” Recommendation 1).
- Instruct the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to create a streamlined process for rehiring qualified government officials who left public service during the previous four years.
- Designate OPM officials to assist agencies in filling positions as effectively as possible while following all relevant rules and policies.

4. Reverse recent changes that harm recruitment and retention. (first 90 days)

- Halt enforcement of labor contracts between federal agencies and employee unions in situations where an agency

imposed the contract without the union’s agreement, and bargain in good faith for new contracts.

- Restore flexible working arrangements, including telework, at agencies that removed them.
- Examine options for ameliorating the harm caused by Department of the Interior and USDA office relocations.

5. Ensure enforcement of anti-burrowing rules. (first year)

The OPM is already *required to review* any proposed selection of current or former (within the past five years) political appointees to permanent positions. Ensure that the team carrying out this function is appropriately resourced and trained.

6. Direct agencies and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) to strengthen scientific integrity policies and the infrastructure needed to enforce them. See the memo “Agency Scientific Independence” for details.

7. Restore and strengthen federal advisory committees. See the memo “Federal Advisory Committees” for 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)
- *Science under Trump: Voices of Scientists across 16 Federal Agencies* (2018 report from the Union of Concerned Scientists)

ENDORSED BY

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