

# DEFENDING SCIENCE FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

A TOOLKIT FOR FEDERAL SCIENTISTS



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# INTRODUCTION

Donald J. Trump has been elected the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. If history repeats itself, a second Trump administration will have dire consequences for federal science and scientists (1). We recorded over 200 attacks on science during the four years Trump held office (2017-2020), far more than the previous record of 98 attacks on science during the eight years George W. Bush held office (2).

During the prior Trump administration, we witnessed federal scientists being censored, scientific reports and publication unduly suppressed, scientific information ignored, anti-science rules and regulations passed, and a brain drain across federal agencies as thousands of federal scientists left their posts (3, 4). The Trump administration's actions to sideline science had negative consequences for the health and safety of the public and our environment. This was particularly true for the most underserved communities across our nation (2).

The negative consequences of attacks on science were made all too clear by the former Trump administration's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under Trump's watch, more than 400,000 people died (5). During the global pandemic, the Trump administration altered scientific reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, implied that bleach could be a cure for COVID-19 during a national press briefing, and encouraged people, companies, and organizations across the nation to disregard science-informed safety measures to hastily open the US economy (6).

The work of federal scientists to protect public health and safety could not be more important to our everyday lives. Their work keeps our air and water clean and our food safe to eat. It ensures the safety and efficacy of the medicine we take. It regulates the safety of the products we use and protects the health and safety of our loved ones in the workplace. Federal scientists are often the unsung heroes who keep us, our families, and our loved ones safe and healthy.

The past is prologue. There's no doubt that the incoming Trump administration will pose a threat to the work of our federal agencies and scientists. Campaign rhetoric and plans in Project 2025 have made those threats abundantly clear (7, 8). Mr. Trump is already planning a purge at our federal agencies, targeting those he deems disloyal (9). With knowledge of the rocky road ahead, many federal scientists will likely leave, and there should be no judgment or shame for such a difficult decision. But many will also stay. With the past two decades of progress on scientific integrity, federal scientists have more rights and protections against political interference than ever (10), but some may not fully understand these rights and protections, nor how to defend science under a hostile administration.

This toolkit provides federal scientists with information about their rights and protections under current agency policies. It also provides advice and information about how to defend and stand up for science during a second Trump administration. We hope there is a strategy here for everyone. Not everyone will feel comfortable speaking to reporters, but even making a note to the record can preserve and help archive instances of political interference in science that can be publicized and investigated later.

We'd love to be wrong but expect that it's going to be a difficult four years for federal science. We hope this toolkit provides some strategies to protect scientists and the important work they do every day for we the people.



## Document Meetings

- What was the name of the meeting?
- When was it held?
- Who attended?
- What was discussed?



## Provide Detail

- Did you capture notable quotes?
- Were specific policy changes discussed?
- Were plans or strategies to sideline science talked about?



## Save Your Notes

- Do not save personal notes on your work computer.
- Use your personal computer to record notes and save them there (if the information is not confidential or classified).
- Send yourself a copy of your notes via a personal email.

# KEEPING NOTES ON THE RECORD

While civil society organizations can request government documents and workplace correspondence under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), a law that cannot be easily undone, political interference often occurs behind closed doors with no paper trail. One simple thing that federal scientists can do to protect agency work is to keep detailed notes and records of meetings or other correspondence (11). The tips below should help to ensure that your notes are detailed and saved appropriately.

- If anyone instructs you *not* to take notes, then record what you remember of the meeting or conversation as soon as you can.
- If there are documents relevant to the content of the meeting or conversation, include those materials in your notes, if possible.
- Try to include as much information about the meeting, conversation, and correspondence as possible, including:
  - Who attended the meeting – names and titles
  - Who said what
  - Date and time of the meeting or correspondence
- Remember to date your notes
  - Send a copy of the notes to your personal email or enter the date of the meeting on your calendar.
  - Take a photo of the notes with your personal phone
- Save your notes using personal devices – never use your work computer.
  - Take note that you cannot save information that is sensitive, confidential, or classified.
  - Classify your saved notes as personal to distinguish them from official “agency records.”
- Ensure that your notes are in a safe, private, and secure location where you won’t accidentally delete them.

# SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY POLICY

Scientific integrity, as defined federally, is “...the adherence to professional practices, ethical behavior, and the principles of honesty and objectivity when conducting, managing, using the results of, and communicating about science and scientific activities. Inclusivity, transparency, and protection from inappropriate influence are hallmarks of scientific integrity”(10). Over the past two decades, efforts to protect the integrity of science have been substantial (1). The Biden-Harris Administration took several steps to strengthen scientific integrity (12), including:

- Mandating that *all* federal agencies establish scientific integrity officers to oversee and implement scientific integrity policy.
- Establishing a fast-track action committee on scientific integrity to review scientific integrity issues of the past and make recommendations for strengthening scientific integrity moving forward.
- Requiring federal agencies that fund, conduct, or oversee scientific research designate chief science officers, chief scientists, or senior science advisors.
- Elevating the role of Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) to a cabinet-level position.
- Developing a comprehensive framework to guide federal agencies through a process of developing and regularly updating scientific integrity policies to ensure strong and consistent protection for federal scientists and their work from political interference.

The framework provides several metrics to ensure that federal agencies are meeting the mark when it comes to scientific integrity. One of these marks is the accessibility and clarity of scientific integrity policies to relevant employees. We encourage you to find your scientific integrity policy now, save it where you can access it easily, and familiarize yourself with it. Federal agencies were also required to provide scientific integrity training. If you have not received scientific integrity training, we encourage you to find out how to do so at your agency or contact your scientific integrity officer. While there may be efforts to undo scientific integrity progress under the incoming Trump administration, the principles of scientific integrity remain. Upholding a culture of scientific integrity and documenting violations when they happen will still be important.

## SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY OFFICIALS

Under the existing framework, every federal agency should have a scientific integrity official. If you don't already know, get their name and contact information. A scientific integrity official is responsible for overseeing and implementing the agency's scientific integrity policy. They also investigate potential cases of political interference in science-based decision-making.

Many scientific integrity officials hold open office hours to discuss potential cases of political interference. While some decisions made by political appointees or others may seem to be unfair or harmful to science, many do not rise to the level of political interference. These officials and office hours can help you better understand whether actions and decisions constitute political interference. Scientific integrity officials can also provide you with resources that may be helpful to better understand your agency's policy.



## Speaking with Reporters

- Federal scientists are permitted to speak with the media about their scientific work.
- Reach out to civil society organizations who may help you prepare messaging.



## Social Media

- Scientists can express their personal views on social media.
- Scientists can mention their title and agency but should make clear they are not speaking on behalf of their agency.



## Differing Scientific Opinion

- Reserved for scientists who have been substantively engaged in science informing an agency decision.
- Allows a federal scientists to express in writing a disagreement with the scientific data, interpretations or conclusions relied on by decision.

# SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

It has been a long and hard fight to ensure that scientists have the right to communicate freely with the public about their scientific work. It is extremely important that scientists can speak to the public, especially when there is a public emergency and the public needs credible and reliable information. It is also important for scientists to communicate about their work when it is being attacked or sidelined in critical policy decisions. Below are some tips and guidance on the rights of federal scientists to speak up and how to do so.

- According to the White House's Framework for Federal Scientific Integrity and Practice (10), federal scientists are allowed to speak freely with the media about their scientific work. No prior permission is required.
- Reach out to civil society organizations to help you craft messages for speaking with reporters, if needed.
- Feel safe when speaking with reporters. If you request and they cannot ensure your anonymity, then you should not feel obligated to speak with them.
- Federal scientists are allowed to express their personal views on social media. They may even mention the agency they work for or their title but should make clear they are not speaking as a representative of an agency.
- If a federal scientist substantively engaged in scientific work that informs a policy decision disagrees with data, interpretations, or conclusions, it is important that they express their views and record a differing scientific opinion to make this known.
- Familiarize yourself with your agency's scientific integrity policy and communications policy, if separate.

# WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTIONS

The Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 (WPA) (5 U.S.C. § 2302(b)(8)) and the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2012 protect federal employees or applicants for federal employment from retaliation for making protected disclosures (13). The WPA also provides penalties for supervisors who retaliate against whistleblowers. A disclosure is protected under the WPA if the employee discloses information the employee reasonably believes to be evidence of:

- a violation of any law, rule, or regulation,
- gross mismanagement,
- a gross waste of funds,
- an abuse of authority, or
- a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety.

It should be noted that not all disclosures made by an employee will constitute whistleblowing. This includes violations of scientific integrity policies. If you believe that you will be disclosing information that constitutes whistleblowing, we strongly encourage you to first consult an attorney.

While your federal agency may provide information regarding your whistleblowing rights and protections, we also encourage you to seek guidance from civil society organizations. For example, the Government Accountability Project (GAP) has several guidance resources for whistleblowers, including a guide specific to speaking up for science (14). This guide encourages scientists to take the following precautions before making a disclosure:

- Consult with an attorney
- Create a paper trail of all relevant developments
- Print or save any relevant documents in your possession
- Keep your evidence in a safe place
- Be careful to avoid being accused of stealing any documents
- Before making your disclosure, make a plan
- Talk with your family, friends, and loved ones before making the decision to disclose
- Avoid creating any other reason to be fired for cause
- Test the waters with colleagues to see if they would support your case
- Seek outside help, including journalists, politicians, or civil society organizations, judiciously.

Whistleblower protections are a matter of law, not agency policy. While the incoming administration may not like the idea of federal scientists blowing the whistle to expose corruption and fraud that endangers public health and safety, there is no quick or easy way to undo whistleblower protections.



## Employee Unions

- There are several federal employee unions that you may be able to join.
- Over 1 million federal employees joined a union as of 2023.



## Nonprofit Orgs

- Many nonprofit organizations can help support federal employees in need.
- If not able to directly assist you, a staff member of a nonprofit organization can provide you with information about your options or connect with you with another organization that can help.
- Some nonprofit organizations have attorneys on staff who can provide legal advice or assistance for whistleblowers, but on other legal matters, too.



## Scientific Societies

- Scientific societies can have large memberships of scientists. These societies may be able to organize on your behalf.

# CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

One way that federal scientists can defend science is to keep making progress on their scientific work and sharing it with others internally and externally, even through personal blog posts if clearance for publication becomes a problem. Federal scientists should also know that they are not in the fight alone. Several civil society organizations are primed to support and protect federal scientists under hostile administrations. Below are tips and guidance on how and whom to approach these organizations.

- Federal employee unions protect staff in a multitude of ways, including providing legal representation, technical expertise, and informational services. The American Federal of Government Employees (AFGE) Council 238 incorporated scientific integrity in its most recent collective bargaining agreement (15).
- Several nonprofit organizations are primed to support federal scientists (e.g., Climate Science Legal Defense Fund, Government Accountability Organization, Environmental Protection Network, and The Union of Concerned Scientists). These organizations often publicize contact information so you can get in touch with them. You can always reach out to a staff member, and they'll be happy to put you in contact with someone who can help.
- Most scientific societies have policy divisions or offices that federal scientists can contact. These offices should be able to help address your issue or put you in contact with someone who can.
- When contacting civil society organizations via email, make sure that you provide enough information so they can accurately assess your situation or issue.
- Never trust an organization that is pushing you to disclose information or do something you do not feel comfortable with. Civil society organizations should be able to provide support while letting you make the decisions best for you.

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