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How Agency Science is Under Threat

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How Agency Science Is Under Threat

The Environmental Protection Agency has a tradition of scientific excellence. EPA has led groundbreaking research on acid rain, lead, chemical safety, and many other public health and environmental issues.

However, in the last four budget cycles, the Trump administration has proposed slashing funding for EPA research programs. When Congress has refused, administration officials have sought to prevent, hide, and discredit research in other ways. They have been remarkably successful despite the existence of agency policies designed to protect researchers against political interference.

Such interference would be antithetical to EPA's mission to safeguard human health and the environment. As EPA's Office of the Science Advisor rightly notes on its website, "The agency's ability to pursue its mission . . . depends upon the integrity of the science on which it relies." Scientific integrity requires objectivity, meaning that outside factors, including political ones, should not influence research. It also requires transparency, with research findings being communicated openly and in a timely manner, even if politically inconvenient.

The Silencing Science Tracker — a joint initiative of Columbia Law School's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law and the Climate Science Legal Defense Fund — documents 295 federal government attempts to censor, block, or otherwise interfere with scientific research and discussion since President Trump's election. While anti-science action has been widespread, occurring at no less than 22 federal bodies, EPA has fared worse than others.

Indeed, a quarter of all actions recorded in the Silencing Science



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Tracker have occurred at EPA, more than any other body. Of those, nearly two-thirds have targeted its climate change research programs, where scientists have been directed not to compile certain data, prevented from speaking publicly about their work, and had their reports changed by political appointees, among other things.

Many of the actions have limited public access to information about climate change, while others seek to cast doubt on the veracity of data that come to light. In February, Administrator Andrew Wheeler erroneously claimed that the modeling of climate impacts associated with high greenhouse gas emissions "is not reliable." His predecessor, Scott Pruitt, falsely declared that there is a lack of consensus as to whether emissions even cause climate change.

The targeting of climate science is not surprising, given the Trump administration's ongoing efforts to dismantle existing regulatory controls on greenhouse gas emissions. What is surprising, though, is the extent to which administration officials have been able to interfere with climate research and censor those conducting it. After all, EPA has a Scientific Integrity Policy that expressly prohibits "leader-

ship from intimidating or coercing scientists to alter scientific data, findings, or professional opinions" and "suppressing, altering, or otherwise impeding the timely release of scientific findings."

Unfortunately, however, many violations have gone unreported. Under EPA's policy, whistleblower protections are available to employees who report "research misconduct," but not to those who report other types of wrongdoing (e.g., censorship) and not to outside parties (e.g., contractors and grantees). Without such protections, many scientists are understandably reluctant to speak up.

In May, EPA's Office of Inspector General published the results of an agency-wide survey in which 42 percent of respondents said they "do not feel comfortable reporting a potential violation of scientific integrity." Commonly cited reasons for failing to report included "fear of retaliation, belief that reporting would make no difference, . . . and belief that politics and policy outweigh science."

EPA scientists are clearly starting to lose heart, and with good reason. While Wheeler has vowed to "support them and their work," in this case, actions really do speak louder than words.