

Republicans and Democrats Divided on Approach to Scientific Integrity at Federal Agencies

By Courtney Bublé

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Republicans and Democrats on a House subcommittee on Thursday agreed that science-related policy decisions should be based on facts, but differed on how to protect the federal scientists who gather and analyze those facts from undue influence.

The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing titled “When Science Gets Trumped: Scientific Integrity at the Department of the Interior” to showcase [the ways science is being censored under the Trump administration](#) as well as advocate for the [Scientific Integrity Act](#), which would prevent agency officials from intervening in their employees’ scientific work. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., chairman of the full Natural Resources panel, said the subcommittee invited representatives from the Interior department to testify, but they declined.

“Agency scientists are self-censoring their reports and deleting the term ‘climate change’ to avoid being targeted by political appointees, they are barred from speaking to reporters without advance permission from the agency [and] they face new barriers to attending professional conferences that are part of the job,” said Joel Clement, a senior fellow at Harvard University and a former Interior Department executive who was [involuntarily reassigned from his climate change work to an administrative office in 2017](#).

Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists, noted that attacks on scientific integrity are not a new phenomenon, however, “The erosion of scientific integrity in government has hit a fever pitch in the last two years.”

At the Interior Department, for instance, officials have hidden from public view memos from staff scientists expressing concerns about proposed oil and gas operations in Alaska, defunded climate change research programs and waived safety regulations for offshore drillers, Rosenberg said. He added that there are, “Practices that structurally sideline science from policymaking, from limiting the types of science that can inform decisions to political review of scientific grants to the elimination or compromising of science advisory committees.”

Former National Park Service Partner Maria Caffrey, testified, “Management at NPS gradually cut off my access to funding and eventually terminated me—not because my supervisors were unhappy with the quality of my work,” but “as retribution for my having made disclosures about the attempted censoring of references to anthropogenic climate change in my report on sea level rise.” Caffrey was the lead of a research team at NPS, which did projects for various government agencies.

In March, Rep. Paul Tonko, D-N.Y. and Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, introduced the Scientific Integrity Act ([H.R.1709](#) and [S.775](#)) in an effort to prevent interference with research. This bill would [prevent political influence from hindering the work of federal employees](#) by barring agency officials from using politics to determine how and when scientists present findings and by allowing scientists to review materials prior to distribution to search for any inaccuracies.

Republicans, with assistance from the testimony of Daren Bakst, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation, agreed that scientific integrity is important but attempted to change the hearing’s narrative. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz.,

called it another example of “political theater” by Democrats. He said, “The Obama administration manipulated models and skewed science to justify their means.”

Bakst also noted that while the hearing was focused on the Trump administration, “There is nothing new about concerns regarding scientific integrity in the federal government.” President Carter’s firing of the U.S. Geological Survey director in 1977 is one example, he said. Republicans at the time alleged political inference after the director disagreed with the administration that the country was running out of gas. President Obama’s Interior Department firing of a whistleblower who questioned reporting on the impacts of potential dam removals was also controversial, Bakst noted.

The Trump administration has actually “taken significant steps” to promote scientific integrity, Bakst argued, such as its strengthening of the Information Quality Act, which requires the Office of Management and Budget to provide guidance to agencies on how to ensure quality and objectivity of the information they publish, and promotion of transparency in science. One way “to help ensure that agencies are not merely doing whatever they want is to have processes and protections in place so that when the federal government is disseminating scientific information or using science to make policy decisions, the science is credible and can be trusted,” he recommended.

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, agreed there is a need for legislation to protect scientific integrity, but said this committee was not the place to develop the bill and that the hearing was partisan in “title” and “substance.” Republicans did not otherwise directly address the Democrats’ Scientific Integrity Act.

Bishop cited a bar graph of scientific integrity complaints at Interior by fiscal year since 2011, which shows they have been decreasing during the Trump era. Later in the hearing, Rosenberg attributed the decrease in complaints to the culture of fear and intimidation at the department that he said makes employees reluctant to file complaints.

Rep. John Curtis, R-Utah, added, “I deeply regret when it comes to the environment we make this such a partisan issue.”

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