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Obama Initiative on ‘Science Integrity’ Must Go Beyond Fixing Bush Era Politicization, Say Center for Progressive Reform Scholars

(Washington) -- President Obama’s initiative to de-politicize science should go beyond fixing Bush Administration excesses to address deeper, decades-old problems in the manipulation of science for politics, scholars with the Center for Progress Reform (CPR) said in a letter to the President’s top science advisor today. Rena Steinzor, President of CPR, and Wendy Wagner, a Member Scholar with the group, wrote the letter to John Holdren, the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, who Obama has directed to design the initiative.

“The Bush Administration took manipulating science to an extreme, but it didn’t invent the practice. We’ve seen a steady erosion of the boundary between science and politics for years,” said Rena Steinzor. “The Obama Administration has an opportunity here to actually clean up the rules that have allowed the political manipulation of science for so long.”

President Obama announced the “clean science” initiative on March 9th, issuing a memorandum outlining preliminary principles and directing Holdren to prepare specific recommendations within 120 days. Steinzor and Wagner call for Holdren to open a formal public comment period to provide experts from a variety of academic fields the opportunity to provide policy recommendations for improving scientific integrity. They write that, “Difficult questions regarding climate change, toxic chemicals, and consumer products loom on the horizon, and the agency officials tasked with resolving those questions need to be able to rely on the science at their disposal.”

Steinzor and Wagner’s letter says the President’s memo rightly seeks to undo the behind-the-scenes scientific manipulation of the Bush administration -- the memo addresses improving transparency, hiring only scientifically qualified personnel, and protecting whistleblowers, steps that will help. Steinzor and Wagner suggest three specific further reforms that could complement the President’s proposals: eliminating systemic biases in favor of industry-funded science, ensuring the best candidates are seated on the independent advisory committees that oversee the agencies’ work, and promoting full disclosure of environmental and public health information. They call for the new White House policy to:

Eliminate systemic biases that favor industry-funded science. Today, industry-funded researchers don’t have to make their data publicly available in the same ways that publicly-funded researchers do. Steinzor and Wagner warn of according industry research “most favored science status,” and say that federal agencies should require private research used for regulation to satisfy at least the same transparency and disclosure requirements as are currently applied to publicly funded research.

Clean up bias and conflicts of interest on scientific review panels. Many federal agencies such as the EPA use advisory panels to provide expert guidance on how to design regulations that protect the public. But under existing laws, the panels can easily be filled with members who do not accurately represent the views of the scientific community, sometimes with a heavy pro-industry bias. Agencies should improve the processes that they use to screen potential advisory committee members for biases and conflicts of interest.

Stop excessive secrecy in environmental and public health information. Federal agencies have been complicit in regulated businesses' attempts to shield useful risk information from the public through overbroad use of the trade secrets doctrine. By simply stamping any submission to an agency as a "trade secret" or "confidential business information (CBI)," manufacturers increase the likelihood that the information will be kept under lock-and-key, out of the reach of both the general public and officials who lack the proper security clearances. Federal agencies should reform their CBI policies, limiting the kinds of information that can be kept secret.

A full copy of Steinzor and Wagner's letter is available at:

www.progressivereform.org/articles/Holdren_CleanSci_Letter_040309.pdf.

The Center for Progressive Reform's July 2008 white paper on de-politicizing science, *Saving Science from Politics: Nine Essential Reforms of the Legal System* is available at:

<http://www.progressivereform.org/articles/SavingScience805.pdf>.

Rena Steinzor is a professor at the University of Maryland School of Law and Wendy Wagner is a professor at the University of Texas School of Law and Case Western Reserve University School of Law.

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