Protecting Public Sector Scientists

Francesca T. Grifo
Scientific Integrity Program
Union of Concerned Scientists
www.ucsusa.org
• Why does a scientist need to be a whistleblower?

• Retaliation levels against agency scientists

• Protecting scientist whistleblowers
Why does a scientist need to be a whistleblower?

– Bad things are happening
– Agencies are not transparent
The Role of Science in Public Policy

- Science is rarely the only factor in public policy decisions
- Manipulation or suppression of science before it enters the public policy arena
- Changing science to cover political decisions
Kinds of Interference

- Fabrication
- False Uncertainty
- Tampering with Process
- Disregard of Legally Mandated Science
- Suppression and Delay
- Censorship
- Conflicts of Interest
- Intimidation
- Retaliation
- Corruption
- Falsification
- Reduced monitoring
- Centralized, Homogenized, Secret or Uninformed Decision Making
- Selective Reductions in Budgets
- Weakened Enforcement
From science of climate change to mercury emissions to Vioxx to lead contaminated lunchboxes to.....

www.ucsusa.org/atoz
Why does a scientist need to be a whistleblower?

– Bad things are happening
– Executive branch is not transparent
- Don’t tell if you don’t have to!

- Few protections if you do tell!!
Retaliation

• One in three federal scientists who responded to questionnaires reported fear of retaliation for openly expressing concerns about their agency’s work - over 1100 federal scientists
Fish and Wildlife Service

- 42 percent of responding FWS scientists said they could not openly express "concerns about the biological needs of species and habitats without fear of retaliation"
- 30 percent did not feel they could do so even inside the confines of the agency
Food and Drug Administration

- 40 percent of responding FDA scientists said they could not publicly express "concerns about public health without fear of retaliation"

- 36 percent did not feel they could do so even inside the confines of the agency

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), now in its hundredth year, is responsible for protecting and advancing public health through the regulation of drugs, food, medical devices, cosmetics, and the blood supply—products that accounting to the FDA amount to 25 percent of some American economy dollar sick. The FDA mission statement calls for "helping the public get the accurate, science-based information they need to use medicines and foods to improve their health." Unfortunately, scientists at the agency are concerned that science no longer plays this crucial role in the FDA’s regulatory decisions.

In 2006, the Union of Concerned Scientists and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility distributed a 39-question survey to 3,500 FDA scientists in order to examine the state of science at the FDA. The results paint a picture of a beleaguered agency: hundreds of scientists reported significant interference with the FDA’s scientific work, compromising the agency’s ability to fulfill its mission of protecting public health and safety.

Independent science must be the driving force for decisions made by the FDA. Based on the survey responses from FDA scientists, it is clear that the agency needs to demonstrate greater respect for independent science and improve both the transparency and accountability of its decisions. For this to occur, both the FDA leadership and Congress must act swiftly to pursue reform. Without real leadership on behalf of experts, the FDA cannot do its job—with consequences for public health and safety.
Environmental Protection Agency

- 492 (31%) felt they could not speak candidly within the agency
- 382 (24%) felt they could not do so outside the agency
“Remove the current atmosphere where scientists who report findings truthfully may face consequences if they contradict administration policies”

NOAA Scientist

“Take the fear and career intimidation off the backs of the biologists”

FWS Scientist
Protecting Federal Scientists

Freedom to:

- Conduct their work without political or private-sector interference
- Candidly communicate their findings
- Disclose abuses of science
Federal Science and the Public Good

Securing the Integrity of Science in Policy Making
Presidential Transition

• New Administration – but…

• Creating the demand for reform

• Overcome complacency
An uphill battle no matter the party.

vs.

An uphill battle no matter the party.
Pernicious Interference
- more than skin deep

- Institutionalization of the abuse of science
- Increased power of political appointees
- Centralization of policymaking
- “Cultural” acceptance of interference
- Last minute systemic abuses
The Well-Oiled Machine

- Whistleblowers are key to disarming it!