March 23, 2021

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson
House Science, Space and Technology Committee
2321 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Frank Lucas
House Science, Space and Technology Committee
2321 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Lucas,

The undersigned organizations write to urge you to support the Scientific Integrity Act and pass the bill out of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee. The Scientific Integrity Act would ensure scientists can carry out their research—and communicate it with the public—without fear of political pressure or retaliation. As the federal government continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and work toward recovery, it is essential that science and expert opinion are unconstrained by political interference, fear of retribution or suppression.

Over the past year, we have seen how efforts to undermine scientific integrity in government have hindered the country's pandemic response. Leaders within the Trump administration empowered political appointees to dictate the government's response efforts,[1] while simultaneously preventing scientific experts from participating in high-level meetings[2] or communicating freely with the public.[3] When scientists at Health and Human Services pushed back on these policies, they were punished.[4] When they cautioned against the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 until there was sufficient clinical trial data confirming its efficacy, President Trump repeatedly pushed for the drug's use and silenced experts, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, who warned there was not yet enough scientific evidence to support President Trump's claims.[5] (The Food and Drug Administration later revoked hydroxychloroquine's emergency use authorization.)[6] There is no doubt that these actions and the government's general failure to foster independent science, transparent decision-making, or scientific free speech had devastating consequences. One recent study by Columbia University found that hundreds of thousands of deaths could have been avoided if the government had implemented science-based policies sooner and fostered more robust federal coordination.[7]

The Scientific Integrity Act contains provisions that would prevent many of these attacks on science from happening again. It would require that scientific conclusions be made free of political considerations or ideology. It would also prohibit political appointees from manipulating scientific findings, or impeding the release and communication of those findings to the public through scientific journals or the media.

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[1] https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/jared-kushners-role-in-the-coronavirus-response
[2] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-secrecy-exclusive/exclusive-white-house-told-federal-health-agency-to-classify-coronavirus-deliberations-sources-idUSKBN20Y2LM
[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/us/politics/us-coronavirus-pence.html
[4] https://apnews.com/article/3bad7a218563f34a4ec04e79cc27096a
[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/us/politics/trump-hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus.html
[6] https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-revokes-emergency-use-authorization-chloroquine-and
[7] https://ncdp.columbia.edu/custom-content/uploads/2020/10/Avoidable-COVID-19-Deaths-US-NCDP.pdf

These avenues of communications are essential for enabling not only the free flow of information during the pandemic, but also for future oversight of and accountability for government decision-making.

The new administration has already taken steps to correct the course set over the past year, but Congress has the power to make sure that scientific integrity is not left to the whim of changing administrations and political appointees. The Scientific Integrity Act would require that each federal science agency adopt and enforce a scientific integrity policy approved by the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. These policies would establish minimum standards, develop a process to report actions that result in losses of scientific integrity, and dedicate staff to investigating and reporting on such allegations.

We are fortunate to live in a country filled with scientists who have the expertise necessary to guide us out of the pandemic and other serious challenges facing our country. But these scientists cannot do their jobs unless their voices and work are protected against censorship, manipulation and retribution. We have seen how the pandemic has tested the government's ability to respond to a national emergency and uphold the principles of scientific integrity—principles that are necessary for future oversight and accountability efforts as the country reckons with the fallout from our flawed pandemic response. We urge you to support the Scientific Integrity Act and pass the bill out of your committee. The country cannot afford to have these principles discarded again.

Sincerely,

American Meteorological Society
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics (CREW)
Climate Science Legal Defense Fund
Digital Democracy Project
Environmental Protection Network
Government Accountability Project
Government Information Watch
Jacobs Institute of Women's Health
National Center for Health Research
Ocean Conservancy
Open The Government
Project On Government Oversight (POGO)
Society for Conservation Biology North America
Society of Professional Journalists
Union of Concerned Scientists