

LETTERS

Comment on "Communicating Government Science"

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Soroosh Sorooshian's editorial in the 18 April issue of *Eos* (87(16) 2005) is a timely reminder of the need for unambiguous guidelines governing the interactions between government scientists and the media. His comments implicitly recognize the central role that science plays in a modern democratic society, which includes informing policy at the highest levels of government and educating the general public about the world we inhabit. Federal research scientists, who constitute approximately 15 percent of the AGU's U.S. membership, have a unique public responsibility. They would welcome a consistent policy for the review and approval of publications, oral presentations, and media communications.

An example of the value and success that such a policy can have to both science and the nation is evident in the operations of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). For more than a century, the USGS has had clear policies and procedures for ensuring the communication of accurate, high-quality, and impartial scientific information. These policies and procedures are set forth in the USGS Manual under sections entitled "Approval by the director for outside publication and oral presentation," "Review of

USGS publications and abstracts of oral presentations for policy-sensitive issues," and "News release and media relations policy." These policies are available online at <http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/500/500-9.html> (.../500-8.html and .../500-5.html).

USGS scientists have benefited significantly from these guidelines, particularly because technical peer review invariably improves publication quality, and internal policy review minimizes the potential for bias by clarifying the gray area between science and advocacy.

Given the broad Earth and environmental science mission of the USGS, many of the topics investigated by its scientists are controversial. A number of investigations, such as those dealing with energy and minerals, for example, can have significant implications for the nation's economy and necessarily affect policies at the highest levels of government. Working within the context of a clearly stated policy has been essential for the successful accomplishment of the USGS mission in such situations; both in the delivery of accurate and unbiased data and information, and in the protection of the rights and interests of the USGS researchers.

One USGS policy is particularly helpful to Survey scientists in avoiding problems such

as those that precipitated Sorooshian's editorial. Under the criteria related to the review and approval of publications, oral presentations, and media communications, specific reference is made to the need for impartiality and nonadvocacy. The guideline states, "The report presents facts and interpretations impartially for others to use for their own purposes. Alternatives are evaluated rather than solutions recommended. Advocacy positions are avoided; so are preaching and lecturing. There is no implied adverse criticism of other agencies, State or Federal, or of the private sector." Had a similar guideline been in existence as part of a broader federal policy, the recent controversy may have been avoided.

The role of a federal review policy for government scientists is not to stifle the dissemination of research findings but, rather, to ensure the objectivity and utility of those findings. This is important for preserving the credibility of science generally. As AGU promotes the establishment of consistent guidelines governing the communication of scientific results by federal researchers, I encourage the Union to consider highlighting the policies and procedures that have long been used successfully by the USGS. These policies have served government scientists and the public well.

—HARRY F. LINS, U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, VA; Chair, AGU Public Information Committee