

September 9, 2019

Cynthia Decker
NOAA Scientific Integrity Officer
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Craig McLean
NOAA Acting Chief Scientist
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Dear Dr. Decker and Mr. McLean:

As former NOAA leaders, we are writing to request a comprehensive investigation into all potential violations of the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy (cf. NOAA Administrative Order 202-735D: Scientific Integrity, and associated Procedural Handbook) related to communication around Hurricane Dorian. Recent actions to censor NWS scientists put public safety at risk, are inconsistent with NOAA's scientific integrity principles, violate the public trust, and compromise the independence and reliability of the National Weather Service.

We also request that you encourage NOAA and Department of Commerce political leadership to make positive, proactive statements that reaffirm the rights of NWS experts to share their expertise publicly regardless of the political inconvenience of that work. Public safety depends on unfettered access to accurate scientific information, and both NWS staff and the public are looking for affirmation that political interference in the communication of such information will not be tolerated.

First, an inaccurate, non-attributable press release was issued on Friday, September 6 that repudiated correct information provided by the National Weather Service that happened to contradict an erroneous presidential tweet. More troublingly, according to multiple reports, experts were told during Hurricane Dorian not to speak publicly about risks to various states, and to route any media requests to public affairs. It is unconscionable that government experts would be prevented from communicating relative risk of hurricanes directly to the public, or to go through political filters to do so, particularly in times of emergency.

The NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy explicitly gives experts the right to speak publicly about their scientific work without asking for permission. Section 4.05 states that:

"To be open and transparent about their work, and consistent with DAO 219-1 on (Public Communications) and their official duties, NOAA scientists may freely speak to the media and the public about scientific and technical matters based on their official work, including scientific and technical ideas, approaches, findings, and conclusions based on their official work. Additional guidance for employees is available in DAO 219-1. Communication by email or other electronic means in response to inquiries from the media, and concerning scientific or technical matters based on an employee's official work, are considered to be the same as oral communication and not subject to approval..."

The policy also gives scientists the right to review official communications that rely on their work. Specifically, Section 7.01 requires that NOAA ensures that:

“Appropriate rules and procedures are in place and implemented to preserve the integrity of the scientific process and the dissemination of its scientific products and information, including providing scientists the right to review and correct any official document (such as a press release or report) that cites or references their scientific work, to ensure that accuracy has been maintained after the clearance and editing process...”

We are encouraged by Mr. McLean’s pledge to investigate the circumstances around the September 6 NOAA press release. However, we believe that the investigation should be considerably more comprehensive to measure the full extent of losses of scientific integrity at NOAA in order to develop a plan that prevents future losses of scientific integrity.

Specifically, we would ask you to consider the following:

- Did the White House or Department of Commerce put pressure on NOAA to publicly undermine the NWS Birmingham social media?
- Who within NOAA and NWS was involved in developing the NOAA September 6 statement?
- Who within NOAA, NWS, the Department of Commerce, and the White House was involved in restricting the ability of NWS staff to publicly communicate up-to-date information about Hurricane Dorian and when were those restrictions communicated?
- Why were these restrictions deemed necessary?

Maintaining high scientific integrity standards is essential to the ability of NOAA and the National Weather Service to protect the public and maintain their trust. Thank you in advance for considering this request for a thorough investigation.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Oregon State University
NOAA Administrator, 2009-2013

Dr. Richard Spinrad, Marine Technology Society
NOAA Chief Scientist, 2014-2017
NOAA Assistant Administrator, 2003-2010

Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, Union of Concerned Scientists
NOAA Deputy Director, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1998-2000