

FULL WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JOEL CLEMENT TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES

HEARING ON SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

JULY 25, 2019

Thank you Chairman Grijalva and ranking member Bishop for the opportunity to testify about the challenge of insuring integrity, both scientific and otherwise, at the Interior Department.

As a 7-yr senior executive at the Interior Department, and someone who stays in close touch with the scientists and experts still holding strong in the agency, I'd like to offer some insight into current conditions at the agency. By way of example, I'll recap how I was treated by agency leadership as I continued to call for strong actions to protect vulnerable Americans threatened by the impacts of climate change. I'll conclude with some recommendations to address the problems we're here to discuss.

When to Say "Enough?"

As Director of the Office of Policy Analysis, it was my job to understand the most recent scientific and analytical information regarding matters that affected the mission of the agency, and to communicate that information to agency leadership. I never assumed that agency leadership would make their decision based entirely upon that information, but I did assume that they would take it into consideration. That proved true for six years as my office provided the latest economic and scientific information to leaders looking for sustainable solutions.

That all ended with the Trump political team, which, as I'll describe, has sidelined scientists and experts, flattened the morale of the career staff, and by all accounts is bent on hollowing out the agency.¹

The career staff at Interior are not partisan in their work, they have a job to do and they do it well. Of course they know that an incoming Republican administration will focus on resource extraction rather than conservation, but they've pledged to support and defend the Constitution and advance the mission of the agency, not their own political agenda. They do their job.

But what if their leaders are trying to break down the agency? What if their directives run counter to the agency mission as dictated by Congress? What if political appointees are intentionally suppressing the science that indicates they are doing more harm than good, and putting Americans and the American economy at risk?

These days career staff have to ask themselves these questions nearly every day, or at least decide where their red line is. For me, the Trump Administration crossed it by putting American health and safety at risk and wasting taxpayer dollars.

¹ Science Under Siege at the Department of the Interior (2018): <https://www.ucsusa.org/our-work/center-science-and-democracy/science-under-siege-department-interior-2018>

Putting Americans at Risk

Rapid climate change is impacting every single aspect of the agency mission, and it was my job to evaluate and explain these threats. For example, as the federal trustee for American Indians and AK Natives, Interior is partially responsible for their well-being. With over 30 Alaska Native villages listed by the Government Accountability Office as acutely threatened by the impacts of climate change, it should be a top priority for Interior to help get these Americans out of harm's way as soon as possible.

I was working with an interagency team to address this issue and speaking very publicly about the need for DOI to address climate impacts, and paid the price. One week after speaking at the United Nations on the importance of building resilience to climate change, I received an evening email telling me I'd been reassigned to the auditing office that collects royalty checks from the oil, gas, and mining industries. I have no experience in accounting or auditing.

It was pretty clear to me and my colleagues that this was retaliation for my work highlighting Interior's responsibility to address climate change and protect American citizens, so I blew the whistle.

I was not alone. Dozens of other senior executives received reassignment notices in that night's "purge." The ensuing Inspector General investigation revealed that the political team had broken every single one of the Office of Personnel Management guidelines for reassigning senior executives, and left no paper trail to justify their actions.² They checked every box for management failure, including discrimination, as over a third of the reassigned executives were American Indian. Most importantly, in my view, they sent a signal that scientific information, and the needs of Americans in danger, were no longer a priority.

This is just one example of how the agency has been sidelining experts and science. Dr. Caffrey's story is another. To make matters worse, there are many instances of the agency directly suppressing science. Among them are reports of Secretary Bernhardt ignoring and failing to disclose over a dozen internal memos expressing concern about the impacts of oil and gas exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; former Secretary Zinke canceling a National Academy study on the health impacts of coal mining right before lifting a moratorium on coal leasing; and Zinke instituting a political review of science grants, led by an old football buddy, that bottlenecked research and led to canceled studies.

The list goes on and on and other witnesses will provide examples. Not only does this group ignore science and expertise, they cross the line by actively suppressing it – at the expense of American health and safety, our public lands, and the economy. They are intentionally leaving their best player on the bench.

This is not what public service looks like.

² Reassignment of Senior Executives at the U.S. Department of the Interior (2018)
<https://www.doioig.gov/reports/reassignment-senior-executives-us-department-interior>

“They Broke It”

The morale has bottomed out in the agency as career staffers are looking over their shoulders and trying to keep their heads down. Political appointees have shown no hesitation to reassign, relocate, or otherwise make life difficult for career employees – particularly the scientists and experts that they consider a threat. As I noted in my testimony to the Science Committee last week, agency scientists are self-censoring their reports and deleting the term climate change to avoid being targeted by political appointees, they are barred from speaking to reporters without advance permission from the agency, they face new barriers to attending the professional conferences that are part of the job, and their work is being incompletely communicated to the public, if shared at all.

Secretary Bernhardt has even restricted telework despite its overwhelming success in achieving management outcomes; unable to treat professionals like professionals, he is now struggling to treat them like adults.

These conditions do not reflect a culture of scientific integrity, but a culture of fear, censorship, and suppression that is keeping incredibly capable federal scientists from sharing important information with the public or participating as professionals in their field.

I'll never forget one conversation I had with a career staffer who was bearing witness as the political appointees hollowed out the agency and crushed morale. Practically in tears, she quietly said “they broke it, they broke the agency.”

This is no accident. As empowered by Congress, an effective Interior Department with high-functioning bureaus and offices operates on behalf of Americans to ensure the conservation or sustainable use of our natural resources into the future, it looks out for American Indians and Alaska Natives, and it prevents private industries from laying waste to public lands.

If, however, the agency is being led by representatives from those very same industries, it is in their interest to hobble the agency so that even when they are no longer in the driver's seat, the agency will struggle to enforce regulations and stand against them. An added bonus to hobbling the agency and its scientific enterprise is that it also compromises the public's trust in the agency, furthering an industry-first agenda.

It goes without saying that this is a betrayal of the public trust.

Recommendations

These are dark times for science, the abuses have been taken to an extreme and I'm sure nearly everybody in this room agrees that we have to do better. More broadly, we've seen a collapse of ethics and integrity norms at the agency. The question is what can Congress do now to ensure that the federal science enterprise and the agency itself can rebound?

I have four suggestions, for starters.

1. Support, strengthen, and pass the Scientific Integrity Act – it provides essential protections to prevent political interference in science and the harassment of scientists

and experts. DOI's existing policy is one of the best and yet it has proven of very little use in the face of hostile leadership. We need a law in place to put some teeth in these policies and provide reliable enforcement.

2. Require that scientific integrity be one of several new ethics and integrity goals that must be included in the agency's GPRA (Government Performance and Results Act) performance plan. The integrity and ethics failings among the political appointees at DOI are legion, and Congress should require that OMB do its job by collecting quarterly reports on DOI's progress addressing these measures, and providing them to Congress in a timely fashion.
3. The federal science enterprise depends upon a full complement of staff and scientists who keep it firing on all cylinders. Right now it's barely running due to harassment and long-term vacancies. Congress should consider setting a ceiling for science vacancies, and, when that threshold is crossed, require that the agency prioritize science hires and make it easier to attract and hire new talent.
4. Multiple lines of scientific evidence have definitively shown that we are in the early stages of a catastrophic climate crisis. Risks to American health and safety and the American economy are rapidly increasing, and the costs of adapting and responding to the crisis will soon skyrocket. Congress should require Interior to "climate-proof" its operations by a) placing an immediate moratorium on new fossil fuel leases on federal lands and sunsetting unused leases, b) re-purposing leasing staff to develop and implement a long-term carbon sequestration plan for public lands ecosystems, c) reinstating and implementing the agency's climate change adaptation policy, and d) reinstating the National Park Service Director's Order #100, generated in collaboration with the National Academy and at least one Nobel Prize laureate, which modernized NPS management approaches to address 21st century issues such as climate change.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify to the Committee.

Addendum 1: Links to Whistleblower OpEd and Resignation Letter

By way of describing the circumstances that led to my whistleblower action and my eventual resignation 10 weeks later, I have submitted two additional documents for the record, my Washington Post Op-Ed the day I filed the whistleblower complaint, and my resignation letter. These documents can also be found at the following links:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/im-a-scientist-the-trump-administration-reassigned-me-for-speaking-up-about-climate-change/2017/07/19/389b8dce-6b12-11e7-9c15-177740635e83_story.html?utm_term=.ba43538db554

and

Addendum 2: Integrity Standards

During my time as Director of the Office of Policy Analysis, I worked with staff to articulate our core values as an organization. I think it's worth listing those values here to demonstrate the integrity of career staff at Interior, and what is at stake when the political leadership does not share or demonstrate those values:

Core Values

The Office of Policy Analysis (PPA) embraces the following set of core values associated with its analysis, work products, staff, professional relationships, and coordination activities:

- Objectivity. PPA work products are based on objective analysis, responsive to decision makers' needs, bureau-neutral, well-written, and intellectually honest. Neutral competency is essential to the integrity of the office.
- Quality. PPA staff are held to high standards and have the ability to approach work assignments in an analytic, systematic, and task-oriented fashion. They are able to work independently or as part of a team, can handle multiple assignments simultaneously, and are able to proactively respond to emerging issues.
- Opportunity. The PPA leadership team believes in a level playing field for all staff and ensures that staff members are valued and recognized for their contributions. Staff members have short- and long-term opportunities to strengthen their intellectual capital both through work assignments and training. PPA fosters cognitive diversity in an open, interactive work environment to facilitate the free exchange of ideas. Leadership provides mentorship for junior staff with an eye to developing the leaders of the future, and in general endeavors to establish an office that is seen as a good career move for emerging leaders.
- Collaboration. PPA leadership and staff are encouraged to develop productive professional relationships both internal and external to the office, including but not limited to engaging in collaborative work with the bureaus, other DOI offices, other government agencies, and academia.
- Expertise. PPA has the diversity and intellectual capacity to effectively address the wide range of issues that face the Department and its diverse bureau responsibilities.
- Integrity. PPA staff demonstrates integrity through honesty, efficiency and reliability.