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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

September 25, 2017

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
1441 G St., NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Science plays a critical role in the development of public policy, law, and regulations on a wide range of issues. From forecasting the weather to information on diseases like Zika, the public and policy makers must be able to trust that federally funded science is reliably conducted and communicated. It is vital that science be impartial and free from interference, suppression, or distortion.

In response to reported interference with federally funded science during the George W. Bush administration, Congress included language in the America Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-69) affirming the principle that federal scientists could communicate scientific findings directly with the public and Congress. In 2009, President Obama directed federal science agencies to develop and implement scientific integrity policies to ensure that independent science fully and transparently informed policy decisions, free from inappropriate political, ideological, financial, or other undue influence.¹ As of December 2016, 24 federal departments and agencies have implemented scientific integrity policies.

I am troubled by renewed reports of interference in the funding, conduct, and communication of science at some federal agencies. For example, at the Environmental Protection Agency, it is reported that a political appointee without a scientific background is now reviewing all research grant solicitations and editing or canceling them when he sees fit.² Across several agencies, references to climate change and peer-reviewed scientific information on the health effects of burning fossil fuels have been removed. Other scientific studies underway have been cancelled, ostensibly to protect the fossil fuel industry from damaging findings. Such censorship is troubling. Debate on science is healthy – in fact, it is part of the scientific process. But, suppression or distortion of science, especially science that impacts public health, cannot be tolerated.

¹ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/scientific-integrity-memo-12172010.pdf>

² https://www.eenews.net/assets/2017/08/17/document_gw_10.pdf

As Ranking Member on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, I request that the Government Accountability Office review the federal agencies' scientific integrity policies. As GAO initiates this study, I ask you to consider the following issues and make recommendations where appropriate.

1. The progress of federal agencies in implementing scientific integrity policies.
2. The adequacy of federal agency scientific integrity policies in ensuring the impartial conduct and communication of federally funded science.
3. If the administration has violated scientific integrity policies by suppressing federally funded science, interfering with research grant activities, interfering in typical scientific processes, or restricting the freedom of federal scientists to communicate findings with the public.
4. The process in which violations of scientific integrity policies may be reported and the adequacy of such processes in addressing such concerns.
5. How well federal scientists understand their rights under scientific integrity policies and whether the workforce feels their work is protected from political interference.

I appreciate your attention to this issue and look forward to the results of this study.

Sincerely,



BILL NELSON

Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable John Thune, Chairman