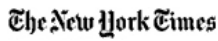


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Expert Panel Offers Advice on Separating Science, Politics

By ROBIN BRAVENDER of
Published: August 5, 2009

A panel of scientists and policy experts urged the Obama administration today to establish procedures for keeping politics from clouding science in regulatory decisions.

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The Bipartisan Policy Center's **report (pdf)** says the White House and federal agencies should try new strategies to prevent the politicization of science. The measures are intended to prevent heated disputes over whether regulatory decisions are being influenced by faulty scientific data.

The report was published by the think tank's Science for Policy Project and co-chaired by former House Science Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.) and Donald Kennedy, former editor of *Science*. The organization was formed in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and George Mitchell (D-Maine).

"Often, policy disputes are cast as fights over science," Boehlert said. "This damages the credibility of science and obscures the real issues that ought to be debated. For example, how much risk a substance poses to human health or the environment is a science question; how much risk is acceptable is a policy question."

One example of such a conflict arose under President George W. Bush, when the administration delayed tough new arsenic standards for drinking water, said David Goldston, director of the Science for Policy Project.

The Clinton administration sought to reduce the allowable level of arsenic in drinking water, but the Bush administration stalled the rule to allow for independent reviews of the scientific justification and cost.

In such circumstances, "the science gets attacked, the policy issues get swept under the rug, and everybody is the worse off for it," Goldston said.

Conflict between science and politics have "left the U.S. with a system that is plagued by charges that science is being 'politicized' and that regulation lacks a solid scientific basis,"

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the report says. "As a result, needed regulation may be stymied, dubious regulations may be adopted, issues can drag on without conclusion and policy debate is degraded."

In a politically charged regulatory process, "the morale of scientists is weakened, and public faith in both government and science is undermined," the report says.

The group's recommendations come as the administration is finalizing a review of federal rulemaking. In February, President Obama ordered the White House Office of Management and Budget and agency officials to recommend ways to overhaul the process ([E&ENews PM](#), Feb. 3).

The think tank's work has been part of the administration's review, Boehlert said. The group issued an interim report in March with many of the same recommendations.

Transparency, clarity

The report encourages the administration to improve the clarity and transparency of the science used to formulate regulations and to encourage a greater focus on science in advisory committees.

In order to clearly distinguish scientific questions from policy questions, the report says, *Federal Register* notices for proposed rules should clearly differentiate between scientific matters and policy matters and should explain what science was most influential in crafting the regulation.

Greater transparency should also be required for agencies' scientific advisory committees, the authors conclude. Advisory committees that exclusively review science questions should generally consist only of members with relevant scientific experience, the report says. The authors suggest that these panel members should be categorized as "special government employees," making them subject to conflict-of-interest and other ethics rules.

But that could be problematic, said Jeff Holmstead, who served as EPA's air chief during the Bush administration. While an adviser's ties to industry should be transparent, he said, such a measure could disqualify some of the most capable scientists.

"Some of the very top scientists on some of these issues work for companies and they would be automatically disqualified," Holmstead said.

Additionally, the report concludes that the process used to review scientific literature in rulemaking should become more transparent and thorough. Agencies and committees should be explicit about their criteria for determining which studies to review and papers that have not been peer-reviewed should generally be treated with skepticism.

"Our recommendations would make the regulatory process more rigorous and transparent," said Kennedy, who served as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration under President Carter. "That should lead to better, more thoughtful regulations and greater consensus when the government is considering whether or not to regulate."

[Click here \(pdf\)](#) to read the report.

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