

Surveying the US Fish and Wildlife Service

Scientist Voices under President Trump

HIGHLIGHTS

Scientists conduct work vital to fulfilling the science-based missions of federal agencies charged with protecting Americans' health and safety, yet some federal officials are sidelining science from the policymaking process, endangering the nation's health, economy, environment, and world leadership. How do the scientists working for the federal government experience the state of science in their own agencies? A 2018 survey on the state of science inside the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) highlights issues in science-based decisionmaking processes at the agency, including evidence of the improper influence of political leadership, growing concerns around censorship of politically contentious scientific work, and challenges posed by dwindling resources. Scientists also report that poor leadership undermines the effectiveness of the agency.

Our nation relies on government science and scientists to protect public health, public safety, and the environment. However, political, ideological, and financial interests often undermine the use of science in federal decisionmaking, harming the public good in the process. While all modern presidents have politicized science to some extent, the Trump administration has escalated the challenge in many areas in both scope and severity.

In February and March 2018, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and the Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology at Iowa State University surveyed more than 63,000 federal scientists in 16 government agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in the Department of Interior (DOI). The goal was to gain insight one year into the Trump administration about the state of scientific integrity in the federal government, as well as agency effectiveness and the working environment for its scientists. At the FWS, 4,383 career scientists and scientific experts were sent a survey; 360 responded, yielding an overall response rate of 8 percent. Across survey items, the total number of respondents varied.

Some scientists receiving the survey at FWS reported that leadership discouraged employees from taking the 2018 survey, citing an internal policy that the agency must approve external surveys. However, no legal mechanism prevents employees from taking such a survey on their own time, using their own equipment, and answering in their personal capacities, as UCS advised them to do.

The results shed light on the level of politicization of science at the FWS, as well as its impact on agency effectiveness and the federal workforce. Despite a strong scientific integrity policy, the survey results strongly suggest resource constraints as well as inappropriate political influence on science-based decisions.



Gary Peoples/USFWS

In early 2018, scientists from the FWS were surveyed on issues of scientific integrity, funding and resources, censorship, top barriers to science-based decisionmaking, and more.

The survey follows and builds on surveys conducted by UCS since 2005 during the administrations of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. Detailed methodology and results from all surveys can be found at www.ucusa.org/surveys.

Scientific Integrity at the US Fish and Wildlife Service

The FWS is essential to protecting the health of species and their ecosystems. In principle and policy, FWS and DOI policies afford scientists the right to speak publicly and without interference, grant scientists the right to review and correct public materials that rely on their work, and establish clear procedures for reporting and investigating allegations of inappropriate interference in science.

However, results from the 2018 UCS survey identify multiple concerns that extend beyond the scope of the scientific integrity policy. FWS respondents reported the distribution of resources away from work viewed as politically contentious. Along these lines, many said that they self-censor scientific language. Many FWS scientists also reported that the agency has not afforded staff with adequate time or resources to pursue professional development opportunities, such as presenting at scientific conferences.

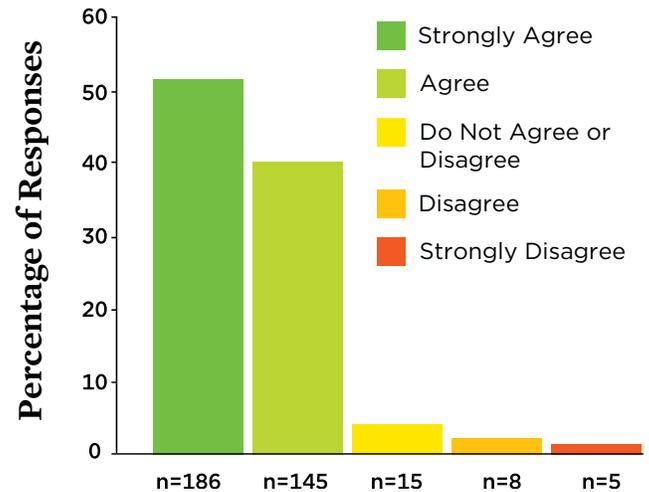
“All actions taken by the current administration have had negative impacts on my agency’s mission,” one scientist at the FWS noted. “These include a federal hiring freeze, especially on more senior (GS-12 and above) levels; real and proposed budget cuts to Interior and USFWS specifically; . . . an obsessive focus with de-listing of endangered and threatened species . . . and an apparent countervailing negative bias toward new listings; added layers of review by political appointees in DOI that have held up finalization of habitat conservation plans; suspension or revocation of key regulations and guidance, such as FWS’ compensatory mitigation policy . . . and distortion of FWS’ mission and goals to conform to administration priorities [such as fossil fuel development] which often run counter to our stated mission.”

FWS scientists report being under-resourced:

- 92 percent (331 respondents) reported workforce reductions at the FWS during the last year due to staff departures, retirements, or hiring freezes (Figure 1).
- Of the respondents who reported workforce reductions, 92 percent (302 respondents) felt that such reductions make it more difficult for the FWS to fulfill its science-based mission.

FIGURE 1. Workforce Reductions at the FWS

In the last year, I have noticed workforce reductions at my agency due to staff departures, retirements, and/or hiring freezes.



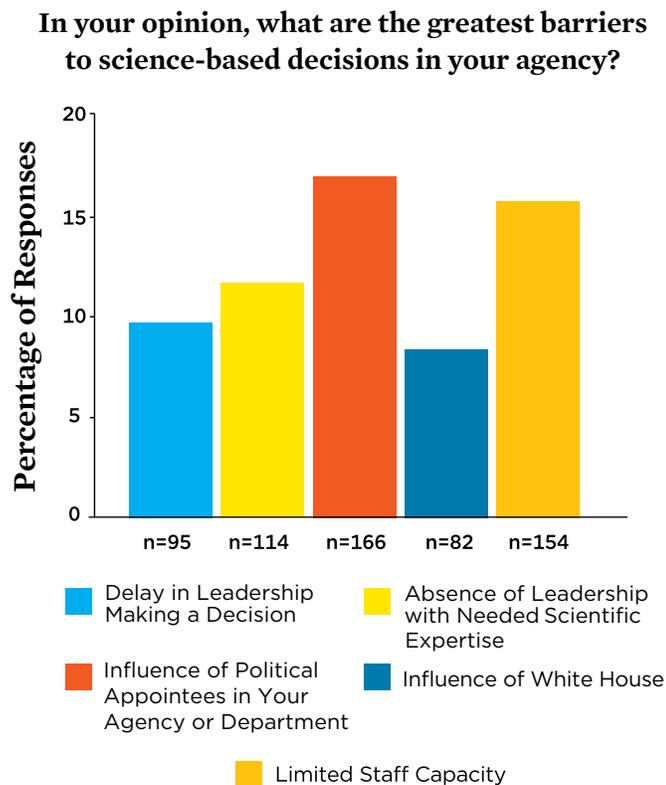
Overall, respondents agreed that they have noticed workforce reductions at the FWS.

- 36 percent (125 respondents) felt that the agency always or frequently collects the scientific and monitoring information needed to effectively meet its mission.
- 43 percent (154 respondents) cited limited staff capacity as one of the greatest barriers to making science-based decisions at FWS.

FWS scientists feel that political influence at the agency is high:

- 69 percent (235 respondents) noted the level of consideration of political interests as a burden to science-based decisionmaking.
- 17 percent (166 respondents) cited the influence of political appointees as the top barrier when answering a multiple-response question about factors that most hinder science-based decisionmaking (Figure 2, p. 3).
- 30 percent (101 respondents) reported being asked or told to omit certain politically contentious words from their scientific work products.

FIGURE 2. Top Barriers to Science-Based Decisionmaking at the FWS



FWS scientists reported that the top barriers to science-based decisionmaking related largely to influence from political appointees within the agency or department, as well as to limited staff capacity. Survey respondents could choose up to three barriers out of 14 options. This figure reflects the top five barriers identified by survey respondents.

FWS scientists perceive their work environment as more hostile than previously:

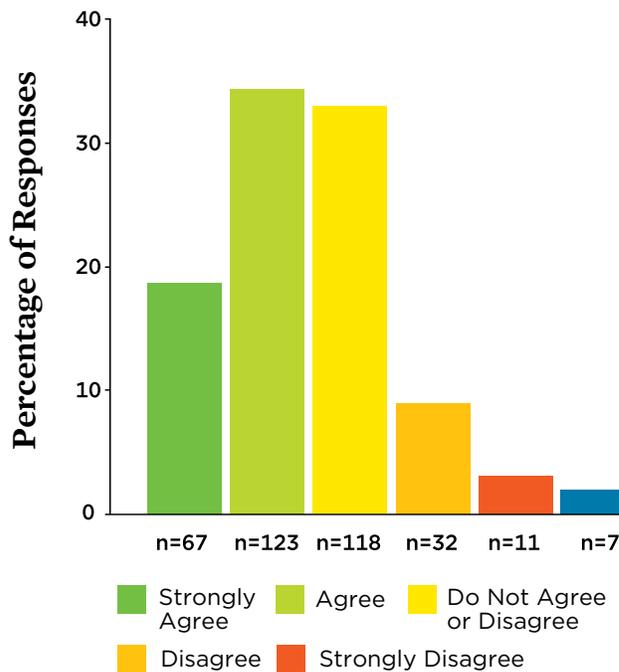
- 58 percent (210 respondents) felt that their personal job satisfaction has declined over the past year. Similarly, 59 percent (213 respondents) felt that the effectiveness of their office has decreased compared with one year ago.
- 53 percent (190 respondents) reported the distribution of resources (e.g., funding, staff time) away from programs and offices doing work viewed as politically contentious (Figure 3).

{ *“All actions taken by the current administration have had negative impacts on my agency’s mission.”* }

– Anonymous FWS scientist

FIGURE 3. Diversion of Resources at the FWS

Over the past year, I have noticed that resource allocations (e.g., funding, staff time) have been distributed away from programs and offices whose work is viewed as politically contentious.



Overall, respondents reported that resources are being allocated away from programs and offices whose work is viewed as politically contentious.

- 24 percent (84 respondents) reported being asked or told to avoid working on specific topics deemed politically contentious. Similar to the 2015 survey of FWS scientists, a majority of respondents in 2018 felt they have the support of their direct supervisors, no matter how politically contentious their scientific work. In 2018, a total of 69 percent (241 respondents) reported agreeing (35 percent) or strongly agreeing (34 percent) that their direct supervisor is supportive of their scientifically defensible positions, compared with the 2015 total of 66 percent (615 respondents) agreeing (43 percent) or strongly agreeing (23 percent).

Scientists Speak Out

Anonymous survey respondents from the FWS cited censorship among their concerns. Here are some examples of what they had to say:

- “My perspective is that scientific integrity within the USFWS is still strong and effective. But we still feel pressure to be very careful and use wording that avoids any hint of force behind it.”
- “At a staff meeting, staff were advised to avoid certain sensitive words when preparing official agency correspondence; words such as (but not limited to) ‘climate change’ ‘Obama administration’ ‘previous administration’ ‘science’ and ‘disagree.’”
- “But, in my more than 30 years as an FWS scientist, you’d have to go back to the days of James Watt [Secretary of

the Interior, 1981-1983] to find an overall atmosphere as hostile to science and as welcoming to political interference and corruption as the current leadership in the Department of Interior.”

- “Budget reductions make it difficult and sometimes impossible to fully collect data and monitor habitat and wildlife populations to meet our mission. The lack of educated staff for survey and monitoring is at a critical level—most surveys have been discontinued.”
- “I have experienced suppression of my own scientific publications not through policy decisions, but through poor management and retaliatory practices.”

Recommendations

With respondents noting some restrictions on communicating their work to the news media and public, scientific integrity at the USDA could best be improved by reiterating the agency’s policy on the communication of scientific work. Moreover, the department should provide adequate resources to offices and programs

conducting important scientific work that informs policies to protect American’s health and safety, regardless of whether or not the science is viewed as politically contentious. Additionally, the agency should strive to provide scientists with adequate resources to maintain professional development, ensuring their scientific workforce remains up to date on scientific research.

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