

GROUPS ACROSS POLITICAL SPECTRUM URGE CONGRESS TO INCLUDE FEDERAL SCIENTISTS IN PENDING WHISTLEBLOWER BILL

March 18, 2008

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

In the next few weeks, House and Senate negotiators are working to reconcile bills to enhance whistleblower protections for federal employees. Your leadership on this issue will help to ensure that the final version of the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act contains specific protections for federal scientists who blow the whistle on the suppression or distortion of federal research or technical information. Such protections, which were incorporated into the House-passed whistleblower bill, H.R. 985, are crucial for the health and safety of all Americans.

Federal government scientists play a crucial role in providing data and scientific analyses to policy makers so they can make the best, most informed decisions about our environment, health, and national security. Whether it is toy safety, drug efficacy, or air quality, we count on federal agencies to use independent and unbiased science to protect us from harm.

Federal law has defined a whistleblower as someone who reports waste, fraud and “abuse of authority.” This definition, however, fails to address the problems facing too many federal scientists.

Surveys, investigations, and media reports increasingly show that federal science is being manipulated, suppressed, and distorted. Indeed, of the nearly 3,400 federal scientists across nine agencies who have responded to questionnaires by the Union of Concerned Scientists, more than 1,100 scientists report that they fear retaliation for openly expressing concerns about their agency’s mission-driven work.

Scientists who expose the suppression and distortion of their work should be protected for alerting the public to potential dangers. For this reason, any comprehensive whistleblower law that Congress approves this year must define “abuse of authority” to include the suppression and/or distortion of federal research and technical information.

Specific whistleblower protections would not give federal scientists the right to usurp legitimate supervisory oversight or policy making that appropriately is delegated to political appointees and senior managers, nor would it allow them to violate federal law shielding national security and proprietary information. Rather, they would afford a federal scientist whose work has been suppressed or distorted protection from reprisal if the scientist publicly reported these attempts.

At a time when Congress has serious concerns about an aging federal workforce and the United States is facing unique scientific and technical challenges, it is crucial that federal agencies do all they can to retain their most experienced and skilled scientists and technicians. Whistleblower

protections for scientists and researchers would improve morale at federal agencies and help to retain and recruit dedicated civil servants.

We urge you to advocate for a final bill that would provide protection from retaliation for exposing attempts to censor, distort, or suppress any scientific or technical research. Congress must recognize that scientists must be able to work to protect the health and safety of Americans, without interference, and should be able to speak out about distorted or suppressed scientific findings without retribution.

Sincerely,

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