PEER
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility
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Representative Henry A. Waxman
2204 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0530

December 10, 2003

Dear Representative Waxman:

I am writing you on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) because of your demonstrated interest in documenting cases where public scientists are under political pressure to change results or recommendations within federal agencies. Recently, PEER conducted a survey among all employees within a regional office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In that survey, EPA staff members say the agency now faces unprecedented political pressure, with Bush Administration initiatives such as the Energy Plan taking precedence over pollution control.

The survey, conducted among employees of EPA's Rocky Mountain Region, also faults the honesty of agency public statements and reveals a deep fear of retaliation, particularly among managers and supervisors.

The Rocky Mountain Region (Region 8) of EPA covers six states: Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Utah and the Dakotas. PEER developed survey questions with EPA employees and mailed out questionnaires to all staff in the region. Of the 675 surveys sent, nearly one-quarter (154 or 23 percent) of all surveys were returned.

The strongest reaction by survey respondents was concern about political interference with what is supposed to decision-making based upon environmental factors:

- More than three in four say that politics are shaping agency actions "more than they did five years" ago, with fewer than one in 16 expressing disagreement;

- More than half think that "promoting the President's Energy Plan and other Administration initiatives has become more important" than environmental protection, with fewer than one in six disagreeing; and

- Strong majorities register a sense that the agency is moving in the wrong direction and is becoming less effective.

As one employee writes in the essay portion of the survey, "this administration has politicized EPA to an extreme extent." An agency manager cites the need to put protection of the environment ahead of energy development "because literally the opposite is true at this time."

In the trenches at EPA, both junior and senior professional staff report that science is becoming secondary to servicing industry, especially the energy industry. Particularly in the essay portion of the survey, employees describe politics as now playing a preeminent role in day-to-day work at EPA.

The survey also reflected a significant fear of retaliation. When asked to respond to the statement "I am hesitant to perform controversial aspects of my job for fear of retaliation" nearly one third of all employees say they do. Significantly, an even higher proportion of managers and supervisors (42 percent) acknowledge fear of retaliation for doing their jobs.

The truthfulness of agency statements both to the public and internally to staff also drew criticism:

- Little more than one in three believe that their senior management "is committed to providing the media and the public complete and accurate information on controversial topics." More than two-thirds of management respondents disagree;

- More than half do not think management "candidly explains the basis for its decisions on controversial issues to the professional staff" with fewer than one quarter feeling the agency "is committed to transparency in conducting" its business; and

- Slightly more employees feel that EPA management do not "usually support recommendations for environmental protection made by Region 8 professional staff" while a plurality perceive that the "interests of the regulated business community" are placed above "environmental protection and public health."

One topic drawing more response than any from individual employees is the lack of consistent enforcement decisions. As staff person notes, due to "a lack of funding" EPA ignores new toxic waste sites that previously would have been part of the Superfund Program: "Basically we can find sites, but then have no way to deal with them."

I have attached a full set of survey results for your review.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director