

BRIEFING: Voices of Scientists at Interior Department Agencies

- Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
- Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement

Prepared by Greenpeace USA, Friends of the Earth, Union of Concerned Scientists

Summary

Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, working with the Union of Concerned Scientists and Iowa State University, sent a survey to 407 scientists working at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and 310 scientists at the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) – both agencies of the U.S. Department of the Interior dealing with offshore oil and gas extraction. We received 63 surveys from BOEM, and 32 surveys from BSEE, for a 15% and 10% response rate, respectively.

The survey questions addressed a number of issues related to the use of science in policy making and the views of scientists from inside the agencies. Several questions were open response questions. More information about the 2018 federal scientist survey can be found at www.ucsusa.org/2018survey, including the survey questions, information about other agencies surveyed, and past scientist surveys.

The survey results reveal that scientists working at BOEM and BSEE under the Trump administration feel a heightened pressure to stick to a script that panders to the oil and gas industry and undermines climate science and basic environmental protections. Key findings include pressure to downplay climate change, influence from the oil and gas industry, and concerns about environmental reviews and scientific integrity policies. Undermining federal science at BOEM and BSEE puts our communities, our coasts, and our climate at grave risk.

Key Findings

1. Undermining of climate science

Scientists at BOEM report explicit and implicit pressure to downplay or avoid climate change in their work:

- 14 BOEM scientists (23% of respondents to the question) agree or strongly agree that they have been asked or told to omit the phrase “climate change” from their work.
- 12 BOEM scientists (20%) agree or strongly agree that they have been asked or told to avoid work on climate change. Of these, eight scientists agreed or strongly agreed that this “adversely impacted my effectiveness at my job in my agency.”
- 16 BOEM scientists (27%) agree or strongly agree that they have avoided working on climate change or using the phrase “climate change,” although they were not explicitly told to avoid them.

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Even one example of this form of political interference in federal science is troubling. One BOEM scientist gave a concrete example of this bias in their open response: “The Gulf [regional office] has moved away from addressing/studying effects of coastal land-loss (something it has done for decades) fearing its associations with climate change.” Another BOEM scientist noted: “The lack of support (though not a prohibition) of our management for research on anything related to climate change (including sea level rise or subsidence) has harmed our agency’s mission.”

This form of interference appears to be more serious at BOEM than at BSEE. In each case, smaller (or non-existent) numbers of BSEE scientists reported the same pressures regarding climate change research. This discrepancy could indicate that climate change is a more pertinent issue at BOEM than at BSEE, and could also be a sign of greater respect for scientific integrity among BSEE’s leadership. In response to more generic questions about omitting “certain words... because they are politically contentious,” BOEM (33% of respondents) again scored worse than BSEE (17%).

BOEM is not adequately addressing the climate impacts of their oil and gas extraction work.

- 24 BOEM scientists (42%) disagree or strongly disagree that “current procedures for assessing the climate change impacts of my agency’s actions are adequate,” while 17 scientists (30%) agreed or strongly agreed.

Another BOEM scientist highlighted the stakes: “Opening the Atlantic to oil and gas drilling/exploration will exacerbate climate change, which disproportionately effects low-income people.” BOEM has traditionally not conducted a full analysis of the impact of its actions on global carbon emissions as part of its NEPA reviews.¹

Some BOEM and BSEE scientists report inadequate protections for environment.

- 15 BOEM scientists (24%) and 8 BSEE scientists (29%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that current procedures for “assessing the environmental impacts of my agency’s actions are adequate.” 29 BOEM scientists and 14 BSEE scientists agreed or strongly agreed.

In their open responses, BOEM and BSEE scientists gave examples of inadequate environmental protections and voiced concerns that oil and gas extraction would have negative impacts on communities.

- “Low income communities close to industrial facilities are unfairly treated even when environmental and human impact is irrefutable.”
- “I am concerned that opening up the Arctic for oil and gas exploration will have disproportionately negative impacts on Native Alaskan communities and their hunting and subsistence activities.”
- “Generally there has been less emphasis on consultation with native american communities/ sovereign nations.”
- “Some scientists at BOEM have been asked to be less thorough with their environmental reviews. Opening the Atlantic to oil and gas exploration will give us more work but we have the same number of people to do the safety and environmental reviews.”

¹ Erickson, P. 2016. U.S. again overlooks top CO2 impact of expanding oil supply, but that might change. Stockholm Environment Institute, April 30. <https://www.sei.org/perspectives/us-co2-impact-oil-supply/>

- “There are old toxic chemical dumping grounds in the Gulf of Mexico which are not being properly accounted for in environmental regs and reviews.”
- “BSEE's Technical Assessment Program has had its priorities realigned away from Arctic research. This decision was made by people unfamiliar with the necessity of this research. This makes it more difficult to make decisions about Arctic exploration activities.”
- “More oil and gas leasing in the gulf will imply that the gulf area will bear the burden of oil and gas development for the benefit of wealthier states. In areas where oil and gas exploration are less frequent, consider California, disadvantaged areas typically bear the burden of development. Developing oil and gas can be dangerous to the environment and put undue burdens on vulnerable populations.”

2. Regulatory rollback & industry influence

Scientists at both BOEM and BSEE raised concerns about the influence that the regulated oil and gas industry has on agency policies and decisions.

- 17 BOEM scientists (28%) agreed or strongly agreed that the “level of consideration of business interests hinders the ability of my agency to make science-based decisions.” 13 BSEE scientists (45%) also agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.
- Similarly, 17 BOEM scientists (28%) agreed or strongly agreed that the “level of consideration of political interests hinders the ability of my agency to make science-based decisions.” 8 BSEE scientists (28%) also agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.
- 8 BOEM scientists (13%) and 8 BSEE scientists (29%) agreed or strongly agreed that the “presence of senior decision makers at my agency who come from regulated industry or those with financial interest in regulatory outcomes inappropriately influences the decisions made by the agency.”
- 14 BOEM scientists (24%) and 6 BSEE scientists (21%) agreed or strongly agreed that in the past year “rules and regulations supported by scientific evidence that were final or near final have been delayed [or overturned].”

A number of BOEM and BSEE scientists gave examples of how this influence plays out:

- “They do not care about Science. They care about their friends business and making money for them. Our Director is only here because he needs to get back into the good grace of the LA Republicans.”
- “We have been told to not uphold regulations because it's considered ‘giving a speeding ticket’.”
- “Too much pressure from industry interests have lead the agency to no longer scientifically review applications for the conservation of resources prior to approval being granted. This is in an effort, I believe, by the administration to support its Energy Dominance agenda.”
- “Delays in approval of agency air quality regulations. Agency’s actions have to be aligned in favor of industry.”
- “Advocacy for oil and gas interests has turned science to a supporting role for the agency's development mission. Science is judged by how well it supports development interests, rather than on it's own merits.”
- “Science is often ignored if it could adversely affect industry profits. The American taxpayer (a stakeholder) interests are not of concern.”

3. Problems with National Environmental Policy Act Reviews

A number of scientists raised concerns about the NEPA review process and some referenced policies put in place by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to limit the amount of information contained in environmental studies.²

- “I feel that streamlining the environmental review process will have adverse effects on public involvement.”
- “New Agency NEPA regulations limiting the documents may limit the amount of comprehensive evaluations of the environmental consequences of the proposed action to the public and decision-makers.”
- “The NEPA process within BSEE (from my experience) is entirely and completely ignored. Even in the face of blatant errors, the project is permitted to carry forth in order to promote oil exploration and development. Conducting NEPA is simply and literally a “check the box” exercise; no real NEPA analysis is allowed to occur.”
- “Under the Obama administration, I was directed to approve a project even though it did not meet the scientific/environmental standard (NEPA) in order to push that project forward so that the administration could claim that they promoted oil exploration and development. As it happened, the then Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell was the signatory of the project even though it did not meet the previously mentioned requirements.”

4. Views on Scientific Integrity

A disturbing number of agency scientists reported fear of retaliation for expressing concerns within the agency, and doubts about the scientific integrity of the department’s work:

- 17 BOEM scientists (27%) and 11 BSEE scientists (37%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that “Currently, I can openly express any concerns about the mission-driven work of my agency without fear of retaliation (i.e., inappropriate criticism or consequences).”
- 17 BOEM scientists (29%) and 8 BSEE scientists (28%) stated that they would “not come forward” if they were to “obtain knowledge about a scientific integrity issue.”
- 16 BOEM scientists (25%) and 9 BSEE scientists (31%) agreed or strongly agreed that “In the past year, I have been excluded from discussions or decisions related to my scientific work that I normally would expect to be a part of.”
- 20 BOEM scientists (32%) and 7 BSEE scientists (25%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their “scientific work and opinions consistently inform policy decisions.”

For Further Information

The 2018 federal scientist survey was conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists and further information about the full survey can be found at ucsusa.org/2018survey. This Survey Briefing regarding scientists at BOEM and BSEE was prepared by Greenpeace USA and Friends of the Earth, with assistance from the Union of Concerned Scientists.

For media inquiries please contact Cassady Craighill (csharp@greenpeace.org). August 2018.

² Doyle, M. 2017. Order limits most NEPA studies to a year, 150 pages. *E&E News*, September 6. <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060059865>