



November 15, 2019

Dear Member of Congress,

The United States government employs one of the most powerful and accomplished scientific work forces in history, with tens of thousands of publicly funded scientists working in more than 20 agencies. However, federal agencies are increasingly impeding government scientists from discussing their work with journalists and the public. Many, if not most, agencies now require their scientists to get approval before speaking to reporters. In many instances, these agencies prohibit scientists from talking to reporters at all. These restrictions are a form of censorship that keeps the American people ignorant about important matters in which science plays a prominent role, such as energy policy and public health.

The [National Association of Science Writers](http://nasw.org), the country's largest organization of science writers, counts both journalists and public information officers — including PIOs who work for the federal government — among our members. Our organization is committed to fostering the dissemination of accurate information regarding science and technology in keeping with the highest standards of journalism. This year, we published a set of information access standards that calls for journalists to have direct, unrestricted access to sources in the federal government. These can be accessed at nasw.org/infoaccessstandards.

An informed public is the foundation of representative government and Americans depend on a free press to keep them informed. Federal agencies' policies and practices that block the dissemination of scientific information are at odds with widely recognized norms of journalism.

We were therefore pleased that the Scientific Integrity Act (H.R. 1709 and S. 775), as introduced by Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY) and Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI), contained explicit provisions that would allow federal scientists to speak to the media, publish scientific findings, participate in scientific organizations, and communicate with the public in other ways. The unaltered bill's passage would have been an important step in removing unwarranted impediments to free speech.

We were dismayed that the bill's language establishing scientists' right to speak to the press was stripped out in the Oct. 17 mark-up by the House Science, Space and Technology Committee (apparently as part of an effort to gain bipartisan support for the bill, as Jeff Mervis reported in his [Oct.17 article in Science](#)). Government scientists' ability to speak to the press should be a bipartisan concern. We opposed such restrictions during the Obama administration, and we continue to do so during the Trump administration.

We call on Congress to support the free flow of information to the public through hearings and legislation aimed at ensuring open communication between federal scientists and the press. In sending this letter, we support the efforts of our colleagues at the [Society of Professional Journalists \(SPJ\)](#) and 28 other journalism and open-government organizations who [sent a joint letter on November 6, 2019](#), and we recognize SPJ's leadership on this issue.

We urge you to reintroduce protections for scientists' ability to speak to the press, either in the Scientific Integrity Act or in future legislation. We welcome opportunities to communicate with you and your staff about the critical role of the media in conveying scientific information to the public.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Siri Carpenter'.

Siri Carpenter, President

National Association of Science Writers

PO Box 7905

Berkeley, CA 94707

president@nasw.org