



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Survey Summary February 2005

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) distributed a 42-question survey to more than 1,400 USFWS biologists, ecologists, botanists and other science professionals working in Ecological Services field offices across the country to obtain their perceptions of scientific integrity within the USFWS, as well as political interference, resources and morale. Nearly 30% of the scientists returned completed surveys, despite agency directives not to reply—even on personal time.

I. Political Interference with Scientific Determinations

Large numbers of agency scientists reported political interference in scientific determinations.

- Nearly half of all respondents whose work is related to endangered species scientific findings (44%) reported that they “have been directed, for non-scientific reasons, to refrain from making jeopardy or other findings that are protective of species.” One in five agency scientists revealed they have been instructed to compromise their scientific integrity—reporting that they have been “directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from a USFWS scientific document,” such as a biological opinion;
- More than half of all respondents (56%) knew of cases where “commercial interests have inappropriately induced the reversal or withdrawal of scientific conclusions or decisions through political intervention;” and
- More than two out of three staff scientists (70%) and nearly nine out of 10 scientist managers (89%) knew of cases “where U.S. Department of Interior political appointees have injected themselves into Ecological Services determinations.” A majority of respondents also cited interventions by members of Congress and local officeholders.

II. Negative Effect on Wildlife Protection

While a majority of the scientists indicated that agency “scientific documents generally reflect technically rigorous evaluations of impacts to listed species and associated habitats,” there is evidence that political intrusion has undermined the USFWS’s ability to fulfill its mission of protecting wildlife from extinction.

- Three out of four staff scientists and even higher proportions of scientist managers (78%) felt that the USFWS is not “acting effectively to maintain or enhance species and their habitats, so as to avoid possible listings under the Endangered Species Act;”

- For those species already listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, more than two out of three scientists (69%) did not regard the USFWS as effective in its efforts toward recovery of those listed species;
- Nearly two out of three scientists (64%) did not feel the agency “is moving in the right direction;” and
- More than two-thirds of staff scientists (71%) and more than half of scientist managers (51%) did not “trust USFWS decision makers to make decisions that will protect species and habitats.”

III. Chilling Effect on Scientific Candor

Agency scientists reported being afraid to speak frankly about issues and felt constrained in their roles as scientists.

- More than a third (42%) said they could not openly express “concerns about the biological needs of species and habitats without fear of retaliation” in public while nearly a third (30%) did not feel they could do so even inside the confines of the agency;
- Almost a third (32%) felt they are not allowed to do their jobs as scientists;
- A significant minority (19%) reported having “been directed by USFWS decision makers to provide incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information to the public, media or elected officials;” however,
- Scientific collaboration among USFWS scientists, academia and other federal agency scientists appears to be relatively untainted by this chilling effect, with a strong majority (83%) reporting they felt free to collaborate with their colleagues on species and habitat issues.

IV. Resources and Morale

There was a broad perception that the agency lacks the resources to accomplish its mission. Not surprisingly, results showed a strain on staff morale.

- Half of all scientific staff reported that morale is poor to extremely poor and only 0.5% rated morale as excellent;
- More than nine out of ten (92%) did not feel that the agency “has sufficient resources to adequately perform its environmental mission;” and
- More than four out of five (85%) said that funding to implement the Endangered Species Act is inadequate.

The survey was sent to 1,410 scientists, of which 414, or 29.4%, responded to the survey.

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