

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

October 11, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

We were alarmed to learn of the September 28 issuance of Secretarial Order No. 3369, "Promoting Open Science," a supposedly pro-transparency and pro-accountability directive that appears very similar to the EPA's "Strengthening Transparency in Regulatory Science" regulation issued earlier this year. Both policies threaten the suppression of scientific information not aligned with this administration's agenda under the auspices of improving science-based decision-making. Our concern is heightened by the fact that this new Order is simply the most recent in a long line of scientific integrity offenses that have occurred at the Department of the Interior (DOI) under this administration, including: control and censorship of press releases and reports, intimidation of agency scientists, review of grants and presentation titles by unqualified political appointees, and jettisoning science-informed evidence that could hamper the fossil-fuel industry's goal of achieving unfettered access to our public lands.

The Promoting Open Science order is ostensibly "intended to ensure that the American people have sufficient information about what their federal government is doing to assess where it is coming from and correct the federal government when we err." Ironically, DOI leadership has been working hard over the past two years to limit the amount of information available to the public about what the federal government is doing. Science is no exception; a survey released in August by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), titled "Science under President Trump," includes hundreds of responses from DOI scientists detailing the intimidation and suppression of agency scientists and their work.¹

Scientists at DOI report they are required to submit conference presentation titles for review by a political appointee, a move as unprecedented as it is unnecessary, and agency scientists are often banned (sometimes at the last minute) from attending conferences at all.^{2,3} DOI policy also now requires the review of all cooperative agreements and grants over \$50,000 by a political

¹ Jacob Carter, Gretchen Goldman, and Charise Johnson, "Science under President Trump," *Center for Science and Democracy, Union of Concerned Scientists*. (August 2018). <https://www.ucsusa.org/center-science-and-democracy/promoting-scientific-integrity/scientist-survey-2018>

² Sarah Kaplan "Scientists at USGS face new scrutiny on research presentations," *The Washington Post* (June 14, 2018). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2018/06/14/scientists-at-usgs-face-new-scrutiny-on-research-presentations>

³ Dino Grandoni "The Energy 202: Interior agency blocks group of archaeologists from attending scientific conference." *The Washington Post* (May 3, 2018). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202/2018/05/03/the-energy-202-interior-agency-blocks-group-of-archaeologists-from-attending-scientific-conference>

appointee with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a long-standing friendship with you, but no apparent qualifications to review scientific grants.⁴

Websites, press interactions, and reports also seem to have been subjected to political censorship in multiple instances. Several DOI websites were scrubbed of any mentions of climate change science, scientists must seek heightened scrutiny prior to speaking with reporters,⁵ and, as one scientist succinctly put it in the UCS survey, "*Climate scientists at USGS are being told to hide their work.*" Furthermore, a sentence mentioning climate change and sea level rise was deleted from a press release announcing a scientific publication authored by USGS scientists, a potential violation of the DOI's own Scientific Integrity Policy, which directs decision-makers (including political appointees) to not "engage in dishonesty, fraud, misrepresentation, coercive manipulation, censorship, or other misconduct that alters the content, veracity, or meaning or that may affect the planning, conduct, reporting, or use of scientific activities."

Agency scientists whose findings and resulting actions conflict with the Administration's priorities have been imperiled by intimidation and abrupt, involuntary reassignments to areas outside their expertise, leading some to quit in protest.⁶ After DOI officials attempted to censor her National Park Service *Sea Level Rise and Storm Surge Projections* report,⁷ author Dr. Caffery jeopardized her career and income to ensure the report said what it needed to say.⁸

As with the EPA policy, requiring all scientific data to be public in order to be used for decision-making could have dire consequences for sacred Native American spaces, archaeological sites, and endangered species. We are particularly concerned about the Order's grant of unilateral decision-making power to the Deputy Secretary on what information is worthy of confidentiality, as well as his ability to waive open science requirements for "business information and trade secrets." We are skeptical that this waiver provision is anything but another layer of protection for the fossil-fuel industry at the expense of scientific integrity. Your administration has a record of ignoring scientific information and public opinion in favor of the fossil-fuel industry as evidenced by shrinking of National Monuments, rescinding the National Park Service Director's Order #100, and severely restricting or eliminating public comment periods for oil and gas leasing. Furthermore, by giving themselves blanket authority to disregard science (including climate change science), the Order allows DOI leadership to ignore impacts of energy development on endangered species. For example, this provision could be ruthlessly employed to dispense with polar bear habitat protections and clear the way for seismic exploration and drilling in the Arctic.

⁴ David Roberts "Climate science proposals are being reviewed by Ryan Zinke's old football buddy. Seriously." *Vox* (August 22, 2018) <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/22/17767146/ryan-zinke-interior-climate-research-football-buddy>

⁵ Rong-Gon Lin II "Trump administration tightens rules for federal scientists talking to reporters," *Los Angeles Times* (June 22, 2018) <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-trump-policy-usgs-scientists-20180621-story.html>

⁶ Joel Clement "I'm a scientist. I'm blowing the whistle on the Trump administration" *The Washington Post* (July 19, 2017) https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/im-a-scientist-the-trump-administration-reassigned-me-for-speaking-up-about-climate-change/2017/07/19/389b8dce-6b12-11e7-9c15-177740635e83_story.html?utm_term=.464bd55213b5

⁷ National Park Service "Sea Level Change" (May 21, 2018) <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/climatechange/sealevelchange.htm>

⁸ Shogren, Elizabeth, "Wipeout: Human role in climate change removed from science report," *Reveal* (April 2, 2018) <https://www.revealnews.org/article/wipeout-human-role-in-climate-change-removed-from-science-report/>

We have little trust in the Department's current leadership to faithfully adhere to principles of scientific integrity, not only for the reasons already described, but also because those principles were already cast aside in order to get early access to a highly sensitive U.S. Geological Survey resource assessment, a move that resulted in the resignation of two top scientists from that agency. Political decision-makers should never be given as much unilateral authority over scientific data as the Promoting Open Science order would.

Accurate and reliable science is essential to the Department of Interior's mission. Under your tenure, the Department has repeatedly tried to manipulate that science in favor of promoting a self-described "energy dominance" agenda that prioritizes fossil fuel development above all else. We see the Promoting Open Science order as another example of this trend. Thus, we request that you rescind this order, stop the potential rulemaking process, and recommit the Department to maintaining the independence of scientific research from political decision-making.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources



Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans



A. Donald McEachin
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Niki Tsongas
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