

Nonprofits, Science, and Politics: A Troubling Mix

03.22.18 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



The United States has a long and distinguished history of advancing science through private philanthropy and bipartisan governmental support. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created in December 1970 when Republican President Richard Nixon issued an executive order that was ratified by Congressional committee hearings. Over decades and different administrations in Washington, scientific research and educational organizations, museums and conservation groups, and world-class higher education institutions with outstanding science and medical programs have flourished.

As the first year of the new Administration closes, it's apparent that there have been changes beyond those that are expected and customary with any switch of political control of the White House. A key target has been science itself: the definition, its truth and validity, and its place in federal policy and funding. Orders and decisions in 2017 from the EPA, as well as the Department of the Interior, highlight these problematic developments.

The politicization of science has created a serious dilemma – perhaps even an existential one – for a broad array of the nation's 501(c)(3) organizations.

Requiring Political Screening of Science Grants

A recent announcement from the U.S. Department of the Interior is the latest in a year of unprecedented interference by the government into legitimate scientific research.

On December 28, 2017, the agency issued a formal directive introducing a new political "screening process" of all discretionary grants that the federal agency makes. "Under this new procedure, designated political officials will review each and every grant application to determine whether an award will "promote the priorities" of the Trump administration"; approval or denial of an application"

will be based, at least initially, on resolution of that issue.”

It will apply to almost any award of at least \$50,000 “to a non-profit organization that can legally engage in advocacy” or “to an institution of higher education.” This rule will affect the disposition of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

“Although Interior secretaries under Democratic and Republican presidents have directed federal dollars to support their priorities, the new approval process appears to be without precedent within the department,” according to David J. Hayes, a former deputy secretary in prior Democratic administrations who is now executive director of the NYU Law School’s State Energy and Environmental Impact Center. “Subjugating Congress’ priorities to 10 of the Secretary’s own priorities is arrogant, impractical and, in some cases, likely illegal. ... Our senior leadership team never set up a process like this—that is, a process that identifies broad categories of contracts, at modest financial levels, that must be kicked upstairs to headquarters for political sign-off. “

Not so in the Interior Department run by Secretary Ryan Zinke. The December 28th memo “warns, in a sentence that is bolded as well as italicized, that employees who defy the directive will be subject to even stricter oversight as a result.”

A key Congressional critic, Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), has concerns: “This grant approval process looks like a backdoor way to stop funds going to legitimate scientific and environmental projects” and to “punish scientists doing important work because they disagree with that philosophy.”

Ripping Up Established Science Policies

Just a week earlier than the December 28th directive, Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt issued Secretarial Order 3360 that “wipes away four separate directives and policy manuals aimed at showing departmental employees how to minimize the environmental impact of activities on federal land and in federal waters.” These were policies that “officials had decided were ‘inconsistent’ with the goals of an order” by Secretary Zinke titled ‘American Energy Independence.’”

This is the latest in a line of sweeping *elimination*, without serious review or consideration of opposing viewpoints, of long-established public policy. “[T]he move underscores the extent to which Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and his deputies are uprooting policies and procedures aimed at factoring climate and environmental effects into the department’s decision-making. According to Alex Daue, assistant director of energy and climate at the Wilderness Society, “[o]fficials spent years compiling a list of ‘best practices’ in this area” and the Trump administration “just ripped them up.”

Censoring Science Language

Last summer, the Environmental Protection Agency, under the direction of Administrator Scott Pruitt, also instituted a system like the one just announced by the Interior Department; that is, requiring a political appointee to sign off on each grant before it is awarded. That person is John Konkus, the Deputy Associate Administrator for Public Affairs, who has “little environmental policy experience” but will review every award that the agency makes, as well as every grant solicitation before it is published.

Worse still, according to department insiders including both political and career employees, Konkus has “told staff that he is on the lookout for “the double C-word” — climate change — and repeatedly

has instructed grant officers to eliminate references to the subject in solicitations.”
Konkus has also canceled close to \$2 million competitively awarded grants previously made to universities and nonprofit organizations.

Conclusion

There are many more instances – in these two agencies as well as in others, including those related to medicine and healthcare – that illustrate the alarming and increasing encroachment by political operatives in Washington in what should be fact-based, scientifically valid, budget and policy actions by the federal government. With billions of dollars at stake that can make or break science advances and achievement, this is a critical crossroads for many of the nation’s 501(c)(3) organizations.