



Donald Kennedy is
Editor-in-Chief of *Science*.

The New Gag Rules

THE NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION (NASA) AND THE NATIONAL OCEANIC AND Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are among the most popular and scientifically sophisticated agencies in the U.S. government. Not only do they do good science, they do dramatic, risky, and even romantic things—capturing comet dust, sending surveyors to Mars, flying airplanes into hurricanes, and providing images of impending weather events. They are full of productive, respected scientists. We have published papers from groups at both agencies and have been proud to do so.

But these days, we're trying to figure out what is happening to serious science at NOAA and NASA. In this space a month ago, I described some of the research that supports a relationship between hurricane intensity and increased water temperatures. Two empirical studies, one published in *Science* and one in *Nature*, show that hurricane intensity has increased with oceanic surface temperatures over the past 30 years. The physics of hurricane intensity growth, worked out by Kerry Emanuel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has clarified and explained the thermodynamic basis for these observations.

Yet a NOAA Web site* denies any relationship between global climate change and hurricane strength. It attributes the latter instead to “tropical multidecadal signals” affecting climate variability. Emanuel has tested this relationship and presented convincing evidence against it in recent seminars. As for the many NOAA scientists who may agree with Emanuel, the U.S. Department of Commerce (the executive agency that NOAA is part of) has ordered them not to speak to reporters or present papers at meetings without departmental review and approval.

That's bad enough, but it turns out that things are even worse at NASA, where a striking front-page story by Andy Revkin in the *New York Times* (28 January 2006) details the agency's efforts to put a gag on James Hansen, director of the agency's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, after a talk he gave at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco in December 2005. His sin was that he pointed out that the climate change signal is now so strong, 2005 having been the warmest year in the past century, that the voluntary measures proposed by the administration are likely to be inadequate.

Hansen was told that there would be “dire consequences” if such statements continued. The *Times* story identifies two NASA public affairs officials, Dean Acosta and George Deutsch, as responsible for delivering this news and insisting that Hansen's “supervisors” would have to stand in for him at public appearances. Those will presumably take place in approvable venues and certainly not on National Public Radio (NPR). Deutsch is reported to have rejected a Hansen interview requested by NPR on the grounds that it was “the most liberal news outlet in the country.”

For at least two reasons, this event may establish a new high-water mark for bureaucratic stupidity. First, Hansen's views on this general subject have long been widely available; he thinks climate change is due to anthropogenic sources, and he's discouraged that we're not doing more about it. For NASA to lock the stable door when this horse has been out on the range for years is just silly. Second, Hansen's history shows that he just won't be intimidated, and he has predictably told the *Times* that he will ignore the restrictions. The efforts by Acosta and Deutsch are reminiscent of the slapstick antics of Curley and Moe: a couple of guys stumbling off to gag someone who the audience knows will rip the gag right off.

These two incidents are part of a troublesome pattern to which the Bush administration has become addicted: Ignore evidence if it doesn't favor the preferred policy outcome. Above all, don't let the public get an idea that scientists inside government disagree with the party line. The new gag rules support the new Bush mantra, an interesting inversion of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's view on war: “You don't make policy with the science you have. You make policy with the science you WANT.” But the late-breaking good news is that NASA Administrator Griffin has said that there will be no more of this nonsense, and Deutsch, the 24-year-old Bush appointee sent to muzzle Hansen, has left the agency abruptly after his résumé turned out to be falsified. A change of heart? Stay tuned.

—Donald Kennedy

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*www.magazine.noaa.gov/stories/mag184.htm



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