Just stick to science.” This is a common admonition that Science receives when we publish commentaries and news stories on policies that readers disagree with (rather, we should “stay in our lane” and focus on research). It turns out that “stick to science” is a tired-but-very-much-still-alive political talking point used to suppress scientific advice and expertise. According to a recent issue of The Washington Post, “stick to science” is what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator said in chastising and silencing its own Scientific Advisory Board, of which two-thirds of the members were appointed by the current administration. The EPA is planning to pat these folks on the head while the administration does what suits its political goals. Sadly, this pattern is not new—the administration declares something outrageous, goes through the motions of consulting scientists, and then does the outrageous thing, regardless. The scientific community should not let this cycle continue because facts that have stood up to, in some cases, years of scrutiny are being suppressed in the service of politics.

The latest go-round is one of the most egregious. On New Year’s Eve, the EPA posted four reports from its Scientific Advisory Board commenting on upcoming changes in EPA rules. Three of the four consensus reports from the administration’s own panel are highly critical of upcoming EPA rule changes. These will be discussed in four January conference calls next week (beginning on 17 January). One of the four proposed rules addresses data transparency, which was the subject of a statement that I was proud to sign with my counterparts from five major scientific journals (Nature, Public Library of Science, The Lancet, Cell, and Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America). The EPA Scientific Advisory Board agreed with our statement that the proposal’s push for transparency would suppress the use of relevant scientific evidence in policy-making. The Board articulated, among other criticisms, that the EPA’s proposed rule was “vague, and as a result, can be interpreted in different ways.” In other words, the rule is ripe for markup by the administration’s Sharpies, allowing it to do whatever it wants.

The scientific community needs to step out of its labs and support evidence-based decision-making in a much more public way. The good news is that over the past few years, scientists have increasingly engaged with the public and policy-makers on all levels, from participating in local science cafes, to contacting local representatives and protesting in the international March for Science in 2017 and 2018. Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, the publisher of Science) will continue to advocate for science and its objective application to policy in the United States and around the world, but we too must do more.

Scientists must speak up. In June 2019, Patrick Gonzalez, the principal climate change scientist of the U.S. National Park Service, testified to Congress on the risks of climate change even after he was sent a cease-and-desist letter by the administration (which later agreed that he was free to testify as a private citizen). That’s the kind of gumption that deserves the attention of the greater scientific community. There are many more examples of folks leading federal agencies and working on science throughout the government. When their roles in promoting science to support decision-making are diminished, the scientific community needs to raise its voice in loud objection.

The upcoming EPA public conference calls on the scientific and technical basis of the four proposed rules are an excellent opportunity for the scientific community to mobilize. All who value evidence and inductive reasoning should support the conclusions of the Scientific Advisory Board through feedback to the EPA, local representatives, scientific societies, and other science advocacy organizations.

Because we need to make the science stick.

–H. Holden Thorp
Stick to science
H. Holden Thorp

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