



By Carolyn Raffensperger

Bush Brings Sounds Of Silence, Not Science

The Bush administration is silencing science in a broad array of fields in environmental and public health. A recent example was EPA's decision to "disinvite" several experts from speaking at a conference on pesticides it was sponsoring. The pesticide industry wrote the agency and demanded that it block Dr. Richard Jackson, the senior environmental health official at the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Phil Landrigan, who served as chair of the National Academy of Sciences committee on pesticides and children, and Dr. Lynn Goldman, former head of the EPA Office of Pesticides, from speaking. The meeting was subsequently postponed but these three were not reinvited.

The silencing happens in three ways. One is to prevent scientists from serving on panels if they support positive environmental or public health outcomes, or even speaking, as above. Another is to prevent research from being done that furthers rulemaking or other policy action. The third is to censor research results and otherwise block the public from getting access.

A key example of preventing science from being undertaken is found in a proposed regulation for national forest management. In November, William H. Meadows, president of the Wilderness Society, issued a statement where he decried what he called the "process of elimination." Essentially the Bush administration is eliminating the research that would evaluate the ecological status of roadless areas. It is also dropping requirements for independent scientific assessments and sci-

ence advisory panels which monitor the health of the forest. All of this means that the balance is being tilted toward the timber and other extractive industries. According to Meadows, "the proposed regulation not only violates important principles of good forest stewardship, it also violates laws like the National Forest Management Act and National Environmental Policy Act, which require the Forest Service to protect wildlife habitat and water quality and to provide the public and scientists a meaningful role in the decision-making process."

Further, Bush's science advisors are being chosen for their ideology and ties to industry. Perhaps the best environmental health example is the Department of Health and Human Services Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, which falls under the jurisdiction of the CDC.

Three people are at the heart of the controversy. Dr. Michael Weitzman, a pediatrician at the University of Rochester, has argued that even low levels of lead in the blood may be dangerous in children. He is being replaced.

Dr. William Banner, a pediatrician who is medical director of Oklahoma's poison control center, was chosen as Weitzman's replacement. Banner doubts that low levels of lead might be harmful. According to the *New York Times*, he has made money pushing this view: he advised the lead industry in a Rhode Island lawsuit against lead paint manufacturers. Banner was chosen over Dr. Bruce Lanphear, who was nominated during the Clinton administration but was rejected by the Bush administration. Lanphear, director of the Cincinnati Children's Environmental Health Center, advocates lowering acceptable blood level limits.

Physicians for Social Responsibility says in a letter to the secretary of HHS, "By choosing not to appoint or reappoint to the ACCLPP several leading scientists who are on the cutting edge of childhood lead poisoning research, while selectively appointing new members whose views are aligned with the lead industry, you have compromised the scientific integrity of this panel. That this move comes at the very time when that committee is set to make a major finding about children's

susceptibility to lead, which could have policy repercussions affecting the health of millions of children, is especially disturbing."

A final example of silencing science demonstrate the Bush administration's willingness to block the public from getting access to research that might endanger a favored industry — and warn the public of an imminent hazard. In December 2002, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the Office of Management and Budget prevented EPA from releasing a warning to the public about the dangers of asbestos insulation. According to the paper, the announcement to warn the public was expected in April. It was to accompany an agency declaration of a public health emergency in Libby, Montana.

In Libby, ore from a vermiculite mine was contaminated with an extremely lethal asbestos fiber that has killed or sickened thousands of miners and their families. A public health emergency declaration "would have authorized the removal of the disease-causing insulation from homes in Libby and also provided long-term medical care for those made sick. Additionally, it would have triggered notification of property owners elsewhere who might be exposed to the contaminated insulation," the paper reported.

The decision not to notify homeowners of the dangers posed by the asbestos was "the wrong thing to do," the paper quoted former EPA Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus. "When the government comes across this kind of information and doesn't tell people about it, I just think it's wrong, unconscionable."

But, the paper reports, apparently the Whitman EPA knew the administration was "angered that a flood of [asbestos] lawsuits had caused more than a dozen major corporations to file for bankruptcy protection. The suits sought billions of dollars on behalf of people injured or killed from exposure to asbestos in their products or workplaces."

Also on the administration agenda, of course, is so-called "tort reform."

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