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Environment Canada scientists told to toe the line

Margaret Munro, Canwest News Service

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Environment Canada has "muzzled" its scientists, ordering them to refer all media queries to Ottawa where communications officers will help them respond with "approved lines."

The new policy, which went into force in recent weeks and sent a chill through the department research divisions, is designed to control the department's media message and ensure there are no "surprises" for Environment Minister John Baird and senior management when they open the newspaper or turn on the television, according to documents obtained by Canwest News Service.

"Just as we have 'one department, one website' we should have 'one department, one voice,' " says a PowerPoint presentation from Environment Canada's executive management committee that's been sent to department staff.

It laments that there has been "limited co-ordination of messages across the country"

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and how "interviews sometimes result in surprises to minister and senior management."

Environment Canada scientists, many of them world leaders in their fields, have long been encouraged to discuss their work on everything from migratory birds to melting Arctic ice with the media and public. Several of them were co-authors of the United Nations report on climate change that won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

"It's insulting," says one senior staff member, who asked not to be named. She says researchers can no longer even discuss or confirm science facts without approval from the "highest level."

Until now, Environment Canada has been one of most open and accessible departments in the federal government, which the executive committee says is a problem that needs to be remedied.

It says all media queries must now be routed through Ottawa where "media relations will work with individual staff to decide how to best handle the call; this could include: Asking the program expert to respond with approved lines; having media relations respond; referring the call to the minister's office; referring the call to another department," the presentation says.

Gregory Jack, acting director of Environment Canada's ministerial and executive services, says scientists and "subject matter experts" will still be made available to speak to the media "on complex and technical issues." He would not explain how "approved lines" are being written and who is approving them.

Jack said the policy is meant to bring Environment Canada in line with other federal departments, but insists "there is no change in the access in terms of scientists being able to talk."

He says the intent of the new policy is to respond in a "quick, accurate way that is consistent across Canada."

The reality, says insiders, is the policy is blocking communication and infuriating scientists. Researchers have been told to refer all media queries to Ottawa. The media office then asks reporters to submit their questions in writing. Sources say researchers are then asked to respond in writing to the media office, which then sends the answers to senior management for approval. If a researcher is eventually cleared to do an interview, he or she is instructed to stick to the "approved lines."

Climatologist Andrew Weaver of the University of Victoria works closely with several Environment Canada scientists. He says the policy points to the Conservative government's fixation with "micro-management" and message control.

"They've been muzzled," says Weaver of the federal researchers. "The concept of free speech is non-existent at Environment Canada. They are manufacturing the message of science."

"They can't even now comment on why a storm hit the area without going through head office," says Weaver, whose been fielding calls from frustrated media who can no longer get through to federal experts scientists who once spoke freely about their fields of work, be it atmospheric winds affecting airliners or disease outbreaks at bird colonies.

The weather service has been exempted from having to go through head office. "Due to volume and technical nature of inquiries, weather-related calls will continue to be handled through the Weather Media Access Line," the PowerPoint presentation says.

Under the "guiding principles" of the new policy, it says Environment Canada employees and "subject matter" experts "shall discuss only their own job within their personal areas of experience or expertise" and "shall respect the judicial process with respect to matters before the courts, and federal laws and policies such as the Privacy Act governing disclosure of information to the public."

They "shall' not," the presentation says, "speculate about events, incidents, issues or future policy decisions." Whether this prohibition covers speculation about the impacts of phenomenon such as climate change, which is reshaping Canadian and global ecosystems, is not clear.

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