

A CONVERSATION WITH THE SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY OFFICIAL AND THE EPA COMMUNITY

June 23, 2015
Meeting Summary

Participants

There were over 100 participants in attendance online and in person. They represented several EPA program offices and regions.

Review and Updates

Dr. Francesca Grifo (SciO) opened the meeting. She presented a series of slides providing a review and update on scientific integrity at EPA. Her review covered the definition of scientific integrity and a lack of scientific integrity, the scope and provisions of the Scientific Integrity Policy (Policy), accomplishments to date, procedures for receiving and resolving allegations, current and new initiatives, and other topics. Dr. Grifo noted that most allegations were made anonymously. She opened the meeting to questions.

Question and Answer (Q&A) Period

Dr. Grifo opened the Q&A period by emphasizing that she welcomed any feedback from participants about the meeting and other topics. The following questions were discussed:

- Dr. Grifo was asked if employees will be notified when the new training modules on “ethics and integrity in professional development” are available on Skillport in the coming weeks. She responded affirmatively.
- One participant commented that she was unaware of activities at EPA that Dr. Grifo had mentioned, such as the development of an EPA Framework for Clearance Procedures. She noted that EPA’s QA manual includes a requirement that QA managers review reports. Dr. Grifo responded that a member of the Scientific Integrity Committee has worked to ensure that the SciO’s office considers all QA requirements. EPA’s QA requirements are the starting point for the Framework for Clearance Procedures under development.
- Dr. Grifo was asked if members of Congress had reacted to EPA’s Policy and ongoing implementation activities. Dr. Grifo stated that she was not aware of any reactions from Congress. She added that her office was proud of its work and would gladly communicate it to Congress or other audiences.
- One participant asked when we might see the proposed new inclusions on scientific integrity in the table of penalties for employee misconduct. Dr. Grifo responded that the conversation on the process for developing new inclusions was in its beginning stage, so she could not provide an answer at this time.

- Another participant asked about how the Scientific Integrity program sets priorities between external complaints and internal concerns. Dr. Grifo responded that her office does not distinguish between the two types but instead sets priorities based on urgency; if allegations could have immediate dire consequences, they receive priority attention. Such allegations are triaged, then addressed in the order of their submittal. Each allegation involves extensive investigation and inquiry as well as periods during which an allegation is on hold while awaiting responses to requests for information. Dr. Grifo added that, regrettably, her office is backlogged but is trying to work as quickly as possible.
- A participant commented that a common concern is that outside entities constantly criticize EPA's science, even if it is solidly grounded, and thereby force the Agency to defend the same science year in and year out. The participant asked if there was any possibility that EPA will develop a policy of informing stakeholders, members of Congress, and sometimes other federal agencies that the science is set and the Agency will no longer repeat its defense of firmly concluded scientific findings. Dr. Grifo responded that such challenges are part of the democratic process and should be viewed from the perspective of the parties making inquiries; they are American taxpayers who support EPA and are part of the process, even if their challenges delay the Agency and are difficult.
- The participant added that, with other federal agencies working on the same issues—which occurs often, for example, with emergency response to disasters—there might be the possibility of developing common fact sheets, Q&A documents and the like. Stakeholders who dislike one agency's conclusions will seek conclusions they prefer at another agency; that phenomenon could be reduced if agencies provided the same answers to scientific questions. Dr. Grifo responded that the goal is to settle jurisdictional issues so that the best science can be obtained. She welcomed the opportunity to examine specific cases in which other agencies put forth different scientific answers to the same queries.
- One participant asked about the agreement between the Scientific Integrity program and the Office of Inspector General regarding who would address plagiarism issues. Dr. Grifo responded that the agreement is based on one with the OIG that was developed several years ago and states that plagiarism issues will be delegated to the ScIO's office. It will be available for discussion at the August meeting of the Union Working Group.
- Dr. Grifo noted that participants in the webinar are welcome to send comments or questions to her at any time, now or in the future, and she will reply.
- A participant asked about the length of time that will be allowed for responses to a Policy evaluation survey that will be sent Agencywide in coming weeks. Dr. Grifo responded that the plan was to keep the survey open for four or five weeks to ensure a high response rate. A contractor will use anonymous numbers to track responses and will send reminders until a satisfactory response rate is achieved. The process could require more weeks than

currently anticipated. Martha Otto (OSA) emphasized that the survey will be completely anonymous; survey tracking numbers and responses will never be associated with names.

- Dr. Grifo reiterated that she welcomed the dialogue on the Policy and looked forward to her second year advocating on the issue of scientific integrity. She thanked the participants for joining the discussion.
- The meeting was adjourned.