



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

We performed this special review to (a) determine the validity of multiple allegations that three peer review panelists had conflicts of interest or biases which might have impaired their judgments in their peer review of EPA's draft assessment of the health hazards caused by the collapse of the World Trade Center (WTC) towers, and (b) assess the adequacy of steps taken to balance the peer review panel.

Background

The impartiality of three peer review panelists was questioned because one panelist allegedly had a working relationship with an asbestos company and two other panelists had publically expressed their viewpoints, prior to commencement of the peer review, regarding health hazards at the WTC site. One way such concerns can sometimes be addressed is by using a balanced panel.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:

www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2005/20041104-2005-S-00003.pdf

Review of Conflict of Interest Allegations Pertaining to the Peer Review of EPA's Draft Report, "Exposure and Human Health Evaluation of Airborne Pollution from the World Trade Center Disaster"

What We Found

The seven-member peer review panel selected to review EPA's draft report included one panelist with an extensive history of providing expert testimony and similar services for defendants in asbestos lawsuits, and two panelists who had made prior public statements regarding the safety of the air around the WTC site. These circumstances provided a basis for the perception that one panelist had a potential conflict of interest and two panelists had potential biases that would prevent them from providing impartial input. We found that EPA's Contractor did not inquire whether the three panelists had received funding from industry or had publically expressed viewpoints on the issues to be reviewed. However, our examination of the peer review record did not find that the panel's input was biased, nor that perceived biases and conflicts were so "direct and substantial" that any of the panelists should have been excluded from the panel.

In our view additional measures should have been taken during the peer review selection process to disclose the information about panel members upon which the allegations of conflicts of interest or bias were later made. Specifically, had EPA's Contractor inquired about industry funding, learned whether panelists had expressed opinions publically about the peer review issues, and taken other actions to identify the bases for these perceived conflicts and biases prior to the selection of the panel, EPA would have been better able to consider the need for additional actions to balance the panel or otherwise resolve these perceived, potential conflicts and biases prior to conducting the peer review.

What We Recommend

We made a number of recommendations to better ensure that guidance in EPA's Peer Review Handbook will be fully followed, including that EPA provide:

- better oversight of peer review contracts to ensure that potential panelists are asked about industry financing and their relationship with clients; and
- supplemental guidance and training of peer review leaders regarding the types of information they may need to obtain about potential panelists' opinions and viewpoints when they assess whether panels are independent and balanced.

EPA agreed with our conclusions and recommendations and has either taken actions, or set milestones for completing actions, to address our concerns.