Annual Conversation with the Scientific Integrity Official and the EPA Community

Chair: Francesca Grifo, Ph.D., Scientific Integrity Official

June 2, 2016
Meeting Summary

Participants

Over 50 participants attended online or in person and represented several EPA program offices and regions.

Scientific Integrity at the EPA: Annual Update

Dr. Francesca Grifo (the Scientific Integrity Official or ScIO) opened the meeting, explaining that the webinar serves as the annual update regarding scientific integrity at EPA. She highlighted the importance of scientific integrity and how the Agency addresses scientific integrity and misconduct. She noted that she is negotiating with the Office of Inspector General (OIG) regarding whether the Scientific Integrity Program should take the lead on plagiarism cases, which fall under scientific misconduct and have been under the purview of the OIG. Dr. Grifo also noted the new intranet page for Scientific Integrity and the whiteboard training videos released in FY 2016. Furthermore, Dr. Grifo updated the attendees on allegations and the near-completion of the Authorship Best Practices document. Dr. Grifo spent time discussing the Agency-wide survey with a phenomenal 38.8% response rate. She also listed the many outreach materials that have been developed and the work being done on the Agency's Differing Scientific Opinions Policy.

Question and Answer Period

- A participant asked, from a labor and employee relations standpoint, how the Scientific Integrity Committee partners with other groups regarding authorship issues. Dr. Grifo responded that she had partnered with the participant's office in the past. Following a discussion with the office about the specific issue, Dr. Grifo generally drafts a memorandum with her recommendations.

- A participant asked whether the new authorship best practices indicated that all Agency documents should include authorship. Dr. Grifo responded that this is not the case. The best practices do not create new authorship opportunities; rather, they help Agency personnel determine appropriate authorship for documents that have traditionally listed authors.

- A participant asked whether the Scientific Integrity Committee interacted with unions regarding the authorship best practices. Dr. Grifo stated that because the best practices are not considered guidance or required, unions had not been consulted. The goal is for all Agency best practices to be consistent, predictable and transparent; uniformity is not a goal.

- A participant asked about the consistency of regional science papers with Office of Research and Development science papers. Will the clearance procedures include this topic? Dr. Grifo noted that this issue is about scientific consistency across all areas of the Agency. Sometimes research

will differ, and the best practices address this via a recommendation for advanced notification. Researchers are encouraged to communicate with other colleagues across EPA who are performing similar research well before a study is completed. Unambiguous, consistent and transparent clearance procedures will make it difficult for these issues to be lost during the clearance process, which in turn will decrease delays and the appearance of suppression.

- A participant asked whether any of the allegations are from subject experts who think that they have been circumvented (i.e., not consulted). Dr. Grifo indicated that some of the allegations are of this type. The goal is to discuss the problem with those involved to determine how the issue manifested.

- A participant asked whether the Office of the Administrator would establish a clearance policy and procedure; she noted that EPA's most controversial reports often seem to be cleared through this office. Dr. Grifo responded that two members of the Scientific Integrity Committee represent this office, which will be included in the same way that all other Agency offices are being included in the process.

- A participant asked how the differing scientific opinions issue will be incorporated into various Agency policies. Dr. Grifo responded that the few instances of this that she has dealt with involve regulatory decisions, and ultimately, the scientists just want to ensure that their opinions are considered and not ignored. Transparency is critical, and considering differing opinions fosters public trust in Agency science.

- A participant asked how vindictive actions (e.g., retaliation) are addressed. Dr. Grifo explained that each situation is different, but the ultimate goal is for staff members to come forward and express differing scientific opinions without fear of reprisal. Retaliation occurs but infrequently. Retaliation as a result of whistle blowing is covered under the Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 and addressed by the Office of Inspector General and EPA's Whistleblower Ombudsman. Other types of retaliation are discussed on a case-by-case basis.

The meeting was adjourned.