

Democrats introduce scientific integrity bill

New legislation would require federal agencies to follow scientific integrity policies that emphasize open communication and scientists' control over technical information.

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Twenty-four Senate Democrats have co-signed the bill for the Scientific Integrity Act. But its supporters acknowledge it is unlikely to move forward in the near term when there are so many other political issues demanding Congress's attention. And without Republican support it won't go anywhere at all.

Regardless, any progress is welcome news to some. Max Boykoff, from the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado Boulder, told Research Professional: "I think the real and at times existential threat being placed on government agencies right now necessitate actions be taken by elected officials and others across the political arena."

The legislation will require all federal agencies that fund or conduct scientific research to develop an integrity policy. The bill appears to try to insulate science from politics, and lays out a series of parameters that policies must be built around.

Hiring and firing of science and technology employees would have to be based primarily on their scientific qualifications. Researchers would be able to review press releases and reports that describe their scientific opinion or work. Policy decisions would have to be based on information that had been peer-reviewed or otherwise vetted at a technical level.

The policies may seem vague, but they would give scientists and others the legal tools to challenge what they see as political interference with their work or their ability to communicate with the public and other scientists.

The provisions are similar to those laid out in a 2009 memo from then-president Barack Obama's science adviser. He asked agencies to come up with policies with similar requirements for scientific integrity. In some places, the Senate bill matches the Obama memo almost word for word.

Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, who introduced the bill on 7 February, has said that he wants to protect scientists from censorship. "Any attempt to intimidate or muzzle scientists must be stopped," Nelson said in a statement, according to a report in *Science*.

The new legislation does have one hurdle that will be impossible to clear, at least for the time being: agencies would have 90 days to submit their plan to the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. President Donald Trump has not yet appointed one.

The bigger problem for this legislation will be attracting Republican support. The 24 democrats signed on to the bill are not enough to pass it in the senate. Without a Republican co-sponsor, the bill also won't make it onto the Senate's calendar. And both parties are focused on other business right now.

"It's only been a week since its introduction and the senate's focus so far has been on presidential nominees. It may be a few more weeks before the Senate shifts its focus to legislation," says a senior staff member on the Senate's Commerce Committee, where Nelson is the highest-ranking Democrat.

Commerce Committee chairman John Thune, Republican of South Dakota, has not taken a position on the bill, according to a spokesman.

A few weeks is probably optimistic, according to Benjamin Corb, director of public affairs at the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. He told Research Professional that he supported the bill and

would lobby Senators to vote for it. “But this is a long game, not short game,” said Corb, who thinks it might not be voted on until 2018.

That doesn’t mean it won’t pass. Corb points to the recent COMPETES Act—meant to reduce red tape at the National Science Foundation—which succeeded in the last hours of the previous Congressional term after a long and winding two-year journey.

Even if it takes time, the bill could serve as a good measure of Democrats’ intentions as Congress prepares for other science battles, according to Gretchen Goldman of the Union of Concerned Scientists. She pointed to examples such as a House Republican bill that could give politicians more control over how agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) make decisions.

“If enacted it would be meaningful and would raise the floor for scientific integrity across the government,” Goldman told Research Professional.

She also thinks Nelson’s legislation has a better chance of passing than, say, a proposal to abolish the EPA. Congressman Matt Gaetz, Republican of Florida, introduced that bill on 3 February.

Congressional committee staff members confirm that a House version of the Senate bill is in the works. It will be broadly similar to Nelson’s version. A House science committee staffer said that it would not be introduced before Congress breaks for recess on 17 February.

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