



# Society of Environmental Journalists

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Ryan Zinke, Secretary  
Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington DC 20240

Letter sent by postal mail and email to [exsec@ios.doi.gov](mailto:exsec@ios.doi.gov)

Dear Secretary Zinke:

On behalf of our members and the undersigned organizations, the Society of Environmental Journalists urges you to maintain the decades-old policy of transparency between U.S. Geological Survey scientists and the journalists who depend upon them as critical, and official, sources of information.

We were concerned to read in the June 21 [Los Angeles Times](#) of the apparent imposition of a new requirement that scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey get the approval of politically-appointed public affairs officials at the Department of the Interior before granting interviews to reporters. Citing documents it reviewed, the *Times* reported that DOI press secretary Heather Swift sent an email on April 25 requiring her prior approval for all interviews with national news outlets, and even for interviews with regional news outlets on “topics that are either very controversial or that are likely to become a national story.”

This is deeply troubling, as it would amount to a significant change in longstanding practice at USGS, an agency dedicated to scientific inquiry. It’s in the public interest for us to be able to interview USGS scientists and other officials without political interference.

The *Times* story quotes Faith Vander Voort, DOI deputy press secretary, saying that the department’s communications office “simply asked” the USGS to follow departmental [public communications](#) guidelines adopted in 2012.

As the *Times* reported: “The 10-page media manual says that the Department of the Interior’s communications office ‘must be notified’ ahead of media interviews that ‘may generate significant news coverage, public interest or inquiry.’” The manual, however, does not say that agency employees must get clearance or approval before responding to a reporter.

And as the *Times* reported, the manual also says that DOI “supports a culture of openness with the news media and the public that values the free exchange of ideas, data and information.”

That is particularly important in regard to USGS. As its website notes, it is the nation’s leading federal agency providing science “about the natural hazards that threaten lives and



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN  
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE  
International Prize 2010

livelihoods.” It also does critical research on water, energy, minerals and other natural resources; on the health of ecosystems and the environment, and on the impacts of climate and land-use change.

Journalists frequently need to speak with USGS scientists on matters relating to their fields of expertise. Many of us work on tight, if not daily, deadlines, and adding another layer of approval prevents us from doing our jobs—accurately relaying important scientific information to the public to better their understanding of the world, and in turn, strengthen our democracy.

We also find troubling a [June 14, 2018 report](#) in *The Washington Post* that USGS scientists must now get political approval to present their work at major scientific meetings. Those meetings are an important source of research news, which provide journalists with an opportunity to hear USGS scientists present their findings and report on them.

The USGS is not a regulatory or policy-making bureau. Its scientific expertise and integrity are among the most valuable assets the DOI has. Journalists and the public depend on getting timely, credible information from USGS scientists without having to go through politically appointed gatekeepers.

SEJ urges you to make clear in a public statement that scientists are free to talk to reporters about their work, and to share it freely with their scientific colleagues and the public.

Sincerely,



Beth Parke, Christine Bruggers, Co-Executive Directors, Society of Environmental Journalists

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