

Department of the Interior Guidance on Scientists Interacting with the News Media

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance is to clearly articulate and fulfill the Department of the Interior's (DOI) commitment to release information to the public that is clear, accurate and up to date; comply with accepted best science practices; and coordinate communications so that we can provide the best service to the American public and ensure awareness and coordination across the various branches of the agency regarding scientists' interaction with the news media.

Statement of Intent

DOI supports a culture of openness with the news media that values the free exchange of scientific ideas, data and information, and that provides for the accurate dissemination of scientific, scholarly and technical work. We are committed to keeping our constituencies informed, and we welcome public interest in our scientific programs and activities through news media coverage and other forms of communications.

Departmental Guidance

DOI aims to encourage and facilitate open access by reporters to agency scientists to discuss their official scientific work and findings. At no time will Departmental leaders interfere with or manipulate the presentation of science or scientific findings. Accordingly:

- A. Access.** DOI scientists are encouraged to speak with the media and the public about scientific and technical matters based on their own official scientific work and peer-reviewed findings. As outlined in the Departmental Manual, the Department will "ensure that employees may speak on behalf of the Department to the news media and the public about their official work and freely and openly discuss scientific, scholarly, technical information, and, approaches, findings, and conclusions based on their official work." Comments should be focused on areas of established science, not the application of such science into policy.
- B. Coordination.** To maximize the effectiveness of DOI communications and ensure coordination and consistency of messages, scientists are expected to coordinate with their servicing public affairs or media relations team before speaking with the news media in an official capacity. In the rare circumstances when such prior coordination is not possible or practical (for example scientists approached by the news media after presentations at a conference), scientists should follow up with their public affairs team as soon as possible. Bureaus must continue to raise all issues of national significance (including all inquiries from major national news media outlets) to the attention of DOI's Office of Communications. This coordination is an essential part of our collective work to elevate scientific work at Interior.
- C. Official Capacity.** When carrying out official duties, including interacting with the media and the public in an official capacity, scientists should be cognizant of the applicable ethics requirements, including the prohibition on misuse of position. Specifically, as government employees they are prohibited from using their government position, title or any authority associated with their public office in a manner that could reasonably be construed to imply that the Department sanctions or endorses the employee's personal activities or those of another. In addition, as government

employees, scientists must not disclose nonpublic information during interactions with the media or the public; nonpublic information is information that the employee gains by reason of federal employment and that the employee knows or should reasonably know has not been made available to the general public.

- D. Responsibility.** Scientists are responsible for the content of their statements and must adhere to the best scientific practices enacted by their respective bureaus or offices.