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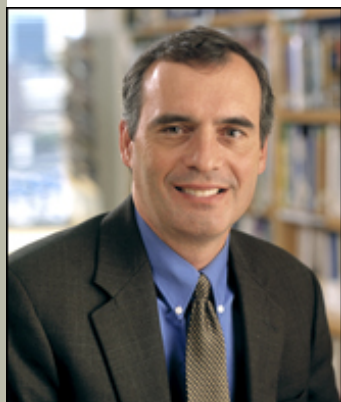
Political Science

An interview with Kevin Knobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists

By Jennifer Weeks

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The Bush administration is gearing up to push for second-term priorities -- including an energy bill, power-plant emissions legislation, and amendments to the Endangered Species Act -- under a cloud of accusations that it has manipulated federal scientific research on these and other issues to support its agenda. These arguments have been voiced most prominently by the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), a nonpartisan advocacy organization that issued [a statement](#) in 2004 charging the White House with "[m]isrepresenting and suppressing scientific knowledge for political purposes."



Kevin Knobloch.
Photo: Richard Howard.

To date, the UCS statement has been signed by more than 5,000 scientists, including 48 Nobel laureates. UCS issued [reports](#) in February and July of last year that documented dozens of cases of alleged tampering with science, including many involving environmental policy decisions. Before the presidential election, the Bush campaign and White House representatives dismissed these assertions -- and the fact that a number of prominent scientists publicly endorsed the Kerry-Edwards ticket -- as partisan politics. But debates about science show no sign of fading in the wake of the elections. Notably, in mid-November the National Academy of Sciences issued a report criticizing the use of litmus tests in filling scientific advisory committees.

UCS President Kevin Knobloch is well-positioned to weigh in on the debate about politics and scientific integrity. Knobloch began his career as a journalist, then spent six years as a legislative staffer for former Sen. Timothy Wirth (D-Colo.) and former Rep. Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.). He was UCS's legislative director for arms control and national security from 1989 to 1992, at the height of the controversy over whether a Star Wars missile defense system would work. After earning a master's degree in public administration from Harvard, Knobloch served as director of conservation programs for the Appalachian Mountain Club before returning to UCS in 2000 and taking the helm as president in 2003.

Grist traveled to UCS headquarters in Cambridge, Mass., to speak with Knobloch about the next phase of the scientific-integrity debate and how nonscientists can get involved.

Q. UCS's [July 2004 report](#) refers to scientists feeling that they are being asked to violate the "ethical code of science." Can you unpack that term?

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A. It speaks to scientists' obligation to report the findings of their research in an objective and unbiased manner, and for them to allow peers to examine and question their methodology -- the whole culture of peer review and publishing your results. The code of ethics is violated when scientists can't publish their results, or are prohibited from speaking at conferences, or are barred from making sure that decision makers have unvarnished access to what the best and the latest science has to say, even if the results are conflicting.

Q. After the elections, White House Science Adviser John Marburger said that UCS and other critics, such as scientists who endorsed Kerry, risked undermining public support for science. His exact words were, "[I]f we're not careful, the scientific community can become estranged from the rest of society and what it cares about." What's your response to that?

A. It's regrettable that the White House science adviser would say something like this. The reality is that the science community was backed into a corner and had no choice but to speak up. This is not about the science community becoming political. This has everything to do with the fact that people who had the responsibility for protecting the integrity of science and of scientists in the federal government turned a blind eye and failed to do their jobs.

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We've been very clear that this is not about public policy. As an organization, UCS does disagree with the Bush administration on a range of policies, but when we agree, we like to say so. While the Bush administration has had a dismal record on environmental protection, they have done a terrific job on cleaning up diesel pollutants, and that's something that we applaud. But on the question of science, we have seen this administration systematically block decision makers from having unadulterated, unvarnished access to what the research has to say, and that's just unacceptable.

UCS stood up and put a spotlight on this issue in a nonpartisan way -- there are Republicans on Capitol Hill who are as alarmed as we are at what's happening -- but now there are veiled threats and some not-so-veiled threats of retribution against the science community.

Q. Is that how you interpret what Marburger said?

A. Many scientists are interpreting it as a threat and are extremely unhappy that a scientist of his ability and reputation would choose to go down such a destructive path. What was worse was a statement by former Rep. Bob Walker, who is now a Washington lobbyist and has been deployed to speak for John Marburger and the White House. [Author's note: Walker, former Republican representative from Pennsylvania and chair of the House Science Committee, is now chair of Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates.] At a forum sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science on Sept. 30, Walker said, "Science does itself a disservice when it mixes with politics in a way that can engender a pushback in the future." We view that as a threat, and UCS will be spotlighting issues as they arise, and continuing to work with the science community, the professional societies, the National Academy of Sciences, and sympathetic leadership on Capitol Hill and in the agencies.

Q. Former White House Science Adviser Neal Lane says that scientists originally asked UCS to get involved in assessing and addressing what was going on with science and the federal government. How did that happen?

A. We had been hearing throughout 2002 and 2003 from both government scientists and scientists outside the agencies who were alarmed. Many of these issues broke in the media -- sometimes in *Science* or *Nature* or the trade press, sometimes they would make it into *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, but always as individual cases. So we started to pay increasing attention, and leading scientists across the country started to contact us and ask us to look into it.

Q. Did any of them suggest that it was a systemic effort on the part of the White House?

A. A number of them felt that it might be, but we weren't sure we could draw that conclusion. We pulled together a group of leading scientists in September [2003], and it was clear that the alarm level was very high. So we decided to do two things: first, attempt to organize scientists around a statement, which does charge systemic abuse -- that is to say, widespread and, in key agencies, a very deliberate, top-down attempt to muffle, censor, and misrepresent science. A number of the original 64 signers, including Nobel laureates and National Medal of Science winners, had extensive input in shaping that statement.

We also hired an investigative reporter and science writer named Seth Shulman, who talked to scientists involved in these episodes, uncovered primary documents, and wrote [the report](#) that we issued back in February [2004], which identified almost 30 cases of abuse. And then in July, we came out with [a new round of signatures and cases](#).

Q. What steps would UCS like to see the Bush administration take to address the concerns that you've raised?

A. Well, certainly an expression from the president that the integrity of science is an absolute priority. We have not had that, even as we have charged his administration with systemic abuse of science.

Q. Has the president responded at all to these charges, or has it all been delegated to Marburger?

A. The president has not directly responded. When we had our first press conference, Scott McClellan, the White House press secretary, was asked about it in his daily briefing and he gave a rote response that the administration cared about science. More recently, the White House has deployed Bob Walker, which we think is regrettable.

We would like the administration to address these concerns directly, investigate the charges, and protect scientists in the federal government. [Reps.] Sherry Boehlert [R-N.Y.] and Rush Holt [D-N.J.] have proposed restoring Congress's independent ability to conduct science analysis. [Author's note: The congressional Office of Technology Assessment was abolished in 1995, ostensibly as a cost-cutting measure.] Many scientists in the federal government do not have whistleblower-status protection, so we have proposed that when scientists feel their work is being suppressed, misrepresented, or chilled, they should be able to file a complaint with a science ombudsperson in their agency and get job protection. The ombudsperson would then investigate the charges and make a recommendation to the secretary.

Q. Have you seen a lot of scientists in senior research positions leaving? Are you surprised that there haven't been more public resignations?

A. This is not a partisan issue, but Sens. Kerry and Edwards spoke to this issue on the stump and pledged to restore the integrity of science in government, so I think a lot of scientists were waiting to see the outcome of the elections. The other thing is that when scientists stick their heads out of the foxhole and say that there are abuses going on, they do so at great risk of the kind of threats that we're seeing today. It also makes it hard for them to get their next job unless they've already won their Nobel, even though they're being courageous and desperately trying to do the right thing. That is why a number of the folks that we spoke to chose to speak off the record. It's clear that they don't feel protected within the government.

We are very worried that there will be a major exodus of scientists now. We'd like to prevent it, and that's why we're working to develop proposals for protecting government scientists. It can take decades to build up a world-class science institution like the National Institutes of Health or the Centers for Disease Control [and Prevention], and in a few years you can decimate that capacity.

Q. What's the role for nonscientists in this discussion?

A. There's a very important role for nonscientists who support the use of sound science in policy making. Virtually every case we've talked about in our investigation has real human impacts. Take the story about EPA's research into the toxicity of mercury. At the same time that the White House was proposing a weak rule to clean up mercury from power-plant emissions and had crippled the new-source review program that required power plants to have state-of-the-art pollution cleanup equipment, EPA was preparing to release a study showing that 8 percent of women of childbearing age had sufficient mercury in their bloodstream to harm their as-yet-unborn children should they become pregnant. And before EPA could release that study, the Office of Management and Budget said, "Excuse me, but we need to review that," and then the study disappeared. They sat on it for months on end, and it was only when someone at EPA leaked that research to *The Wall Street Journal* that it saw the light of day.

Citizens don't have to be scientists or medical professionals or engineers to pay attention when these stories surface and understand the link to their lives -- and then make sure that their members of Congress and the president and their communities know about it.

Q. What issues should environmentalists watch most closely in the coming months for scientific accuracy?

A. Certainly, global climate change is one. You have the strongest consensus we have seen in the science community about global climate change since the conclusion that tobacco caused lung cancer. The vast majority of scientists who study the issue agree that global climate change is already under way, that burning fossil fuels is the primary driver, and that if we do nothing about it, we're facing some very dire consequences. This administration has actively sought to insert uncertainty where there is none or very little, aided and abetted by some of the biggest climate polluters.

There are many endangered species cases in our reports. Implementation of the Endangered Species Act is controversial enough without deliberate elimination or suppression of what scientists are finding in their field studies. Toxics, like mercury and lead, are another issue that bears directly on people's lives and where the science should be beyond reproach.

Q. With stronger Republican majorities in Congress and the administration claiming a mandate, do you see prospects for positive action on this issue over the next four years?

A. Congressional leaders from both sides of the aisle and many within the administration want to protect the government's scientific capability for the benefit of the public, and are deeply unhappy with the damage done during the last four years. We need to collectively take a deep breath and work to restore the confidence of scientists and elected officials alike. UCS would much rather be working to prevent nuclear terrorism, or to convince our government to be more proactive on reducing greenhouse gases, but everything else we're working for is at risk if the individuals who are trying to undercut science succeed. My hope is that people in government will do the right thing and won't attempt to smear this as partisan politics. It's about as nonpartisan as you can get, and we can work together on solutions.

Jennifer Weeks is a Massachusetts writer specializing in environment and energy issues. Her recent articles have appeared in the Boston Globe Magazine, E Magazine, and BioCycle.

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