

THIS WEEK

EDITORIALS

HUE SAYS? Colour firmly in the confused eye of the beholder **p.6**

WORLD VIEW China seeks global leadership in GM food **p.7**



PLANTS Gene disrupter keeps the potato pests away **p.9**

Gone fishing

An investigation into the funding sources of climate scientists who have testified to the US Congress makes demands that have the potential to infringe on academic freedom.

Perhaps it was to be expected. Just days after documents surfaced that raised conflict-of-interest questions about the funding sources of noted climate sceptic Willie Soon, a member in the US House of Representatives entered the fray. On 24 February, Raúl Grijalva, the leading Democrat on the House Committee on Natural Resources, released letters that he had sent to seven universities demanding information on the funding sources of seven other scientists whose views he does not appreciate. Grijalva was right when he wrote in the letters that conflicts of interest “should be clear to stakeholders”, but his investigation sends all the wrong messages.

Somewhere behind Grijalva's motives there is a legitimate point. Scientists have a responsibility to disclose their funding sources and any other ties that could be perceived as conflicts of interest when they publish their work. Institutions, including the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Soon works, must establish policies that lay out the rules for their researchers. Scientific journals must also ask authors to declare possible conflicts. These disclosures should apply to funding from industry and from foundations, regardless of which way they lean, as well as from environmental groups. Where there is evidence that these standards are not being met, there is certainly scope to investigate why.

As a result of documents obtained through a US Freedom of Information Act and released last month by environmentalists, the CfA is now reviewing Soon's case and its own policies (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/2jx;2015>). This is as it should be, but Grijalva's inquiry is a fishing expedition that seems to have been crafted for publicity rather than clarity. Among his targets are a few long-time climate sceptics, such as Richard Lindzen at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Also on the list are policy researcher Roger Pielke Jr at the University of Colorado Boulder, whose ‘sin’ has been to question political convention on climate issues, and Judith Curry, a climate scientist at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta who has engaged with climate sceptics.

All of the researchers have testified before Congress, and Grijalva says that his goal is to maintain public confidence in public institutions by ensuring that public policies are not improperly influenced by outside money. Unfortunately, he laments, congressional disclosure requirements did not compel researchers to report their sources of funding, and “we need to fill in those gaps”. His letters are addressed to the presidents of the researchers' universities and request information about financial disclosure policies, sources of external funding and any formal disclosures of such funding. They also ask for all drafts of public testimony that the researchers “helped prepare for others” and any communications about the preparation of testimony.

Not only does this investigation shine a high-profile light on researchers before the evidence to judge them has even been gathered, but it goes well beyond questions about funding and disclosure by seeking early testimony drafts and personal correspondence. (Grijalva admitted earlier this week that this was an “overreach”, although he is letting his

requests stand for now.) A spokesman for Grijalva and the committee's Democratic minority sought to distinguish between this investigation and a 2005 episode in which former chairman of the House Energy &

“Politicians are singling out researchers with whom they disagree.”

Commerce Committee Joe Barton (Republican, Texas) requested personal communications and scientific data on palaeoclimate research from scientists including Michael Mann, now at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. Grijalva is not seeking scientific data, but there is a reason for the

comparison. In both cases, politicians are singling out researchers with whom they disagree and are seeking access to private deliberations that should be protected in the name of academic freedom.

Scientists must view their funding sources as public information that is always subject to scrutiny, and act accordingly. But when politicians seek to probe beyond possible sources of external influence on published work and attempt to expose internal discussions that they find inconvenient, that sends a chilling message to all academics and to the wider public. ■

Fatal fallout

The Ebola epidemic has had a dire effect on the health prospects of pregnant women.

The late stages of pregnancy are a difficult time for most women, but try to imagine what it must be like right now for would-be new mothers in rural areas of Sierra Leone, Guinea or Liberia. Their eight or nine months of pregnancy have already been overshadowed by the ravages of the Ebola outbreak. Now, when they start to feel abdominal cramps, they are faced with an impossible choice.

Before the epidemic, health educators urged pregnant women with complications to report to clinics. But the nearest clinic is typically a journey of a day or more away — and stories abound of friends and relatives who went to the hospital, only to be told that they had Ebola and never come home.

Pregnant women who do brave the journey are often denied care. Some end up delivering their babies alone on floors or in the backs of ambulances. What would you do — would you make the journey?

Now put yourself in the place of the hospital nurse greeting a heavily pregnant woman who arrives at a triage department, weary from her journey, and complaining of abdominal pain. Such pain is, after all, a classic symptom of Ebola, and although the numbers of cases are easing, you have seen colleagues and friends help pregnant women with Ebola,