

SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

US energy agency strengthens protections for scientists

Researchers given greater leeway on speaking to the press and publishing their findings.

BY ERIN ROSS

The US Department of Energy (DOE) released new guidelines on 11 January to protect researchers from political interference — a move that many say is long overdue.

“DOE officials should not and will not ask scientists to tailor their work to any particular conclusion,” says energy secretary Ernest Moniz.

The revised guidelines come amid concerns that president-elect Donald Trump’s administration will seek to limit federal support for science, including climate-change research. In December, Trump’s team asked the DOE for the names of employees who have worked on climate-change issues; the department refused and Trump staffers later disavowed the request.

Moniz says the new policy is not a response to that incident or to Trump’s election, and has been in the works for a while.

But Wendy Wagner, a law professor at the University of Texas at Austin, thinks that the timing is significant. “The DOE might feel that if they don’t get this policy out now, it won’t be implemented,” she says.

The plan allows scientists to publicly state

their opinions on science and policy if they make clear that they are not speaking for the government. It requires researchers to notify their supervisors if they speak to the media or publish their findings, but does not require them to seek approval for such activities.

“It makes it absolutely clear that notification is the only thing required,” says Wagner. “The tenor of the entire policy seems to be full bore about giving scientists and technical people the complete freedom to speak about their research and how it intersects with policy.”

“The old policy was extremely vague, bare bones and had no structure for implementation.”

and says that they are “encouraged” to discuss their scientific research openly. Wagner believes that this includes the use of social media such as Facebook.

The plan — which applies to DOE employees, contractors and grant recipients — also calls for the department to appoint

an independent ombudsperson to handle complaints. And it clarifies and strengthens protections for whistleblowers.

That is a major shift from the DOE’s previous scientific-integrity policy, issued in 2012. That policy applied only to DOE employees, and required them to coordinate with their supervisors before talking to the media, and to receive approval before publishing their findings in peer-reviewed journals.

“The old policy was extremely vague, bare bones and had no structure for implementation,” says Michael Halpern, deputy director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “When rights are not explicit, scientists that share personal opinions can be retaliated against.”

But it will be up to the next administration to implement the plan. Trump takes office on 20 January, and his pick for energy secretary — former Texas governor Rick Perry — could soon be confirmed by the Senate.

“The Senate really needs to get details from Governor Perry, when they go through the confirmation process, about the specific implementation plans he has to ensure that this becomes a reality,” Halpern says. ■

MISCONDUCT

Croatia’s science minister caught in plagiarism scandal

Pavo Barišić says he won’t step down after a ruling from parliamentary ethics committee.

BY MIČO TATALOVIĆ AND
NENAD JARIĆ DAUENHAUER

In a plagiarism scandal in Croatia, the country’s highest-level research-ethics committee is clashing with its science minister — who says he won’t step down after the committee found he had copied another scholar’s work. Scientists say that the case raises questions about academic integrity at the top of a research system that is already riven with misconduct allegations.

Pavo Barišić, a philosopher at the University of Split, became Croatia’s science minister in October 2016. Soon after that, Croatian media began reporting allegations that Barišić had reproduced text without attributing other scholars in a review article that first appeared in 2008. The charges were old — they had been raised by four other philosophers in 2011 — but Croatia’s parliament-appointed Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education (CESHE) said it would investigate.

On 9 January, the committee’s report was

leaked to the press. The CESHE, which has not yet formally published the report, concluded that a footnote in Barišić’s article used text from a blogpost by a US international-affairs specialist, Stephen Schlesinger, at the Century Foundation in New York City.

For months, Barišić had maintained that he had done nothing wrong, even as academics called for his resignation. But by December 2016 he had changed his stance. He told journalists that he had taken text from Schlesinger without attribution, and had apologized to



Pavo Barišić, Croatia's science minister.

him. The minister said that the fault was merely a “typographic error” — so there was no need for him to resign. After the allegations first surfaced in 2011, later translations and a later republication of the article in a book did attribute Schlesinger, he noted. Barišić did not reply to *Nature's* request for comment.

The ethics committee has no power to impose sanctions, but calls for Barišić's resignation continue. Saša Zelenika, an engineer at the University of Rijeka who was Croatia's assistant science minister in 2012–14, says that Barišić has misled the public. Ivan Dikić, a Croatian-born biochemist at the Goethe

University of Frankfurt in Germany, wrote an open letter to Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković on 11 January, saying that Barišić's actions did not show he could responsibly lead the science ministry. But Barišić has some backing. Other prominent Croatian scientists said in a newspaper article that the case was overblown. Plenković said he would stand by his minister. And on 15 January, another open letter — signed by around 100 scientists — supported Barišić.

The case has wider implications than a back-and-forth about plagiarism, Zelenika says. He sees the reaction to it as emblematic of Croatia's struggles to crack down on cheating. Studies have documented widespread plagiarism among Croatian university students (D. Cepić *Int. J. Educ. Law Policy* 8, 53–60; 2012), for example, and other politicians have also fallen foul of plagiarism allegations.

Some of those lining up on Barišić's side are now seeking to limit the CESHE's investigational powers. In November 2016, academic heads at the University of Zagreb initiated a case in Croatia's constitutional court to review whether the CESHE should retain its statutory authority to pronounce on university ethics disputes. If the case removes CESHE's authority, then Croatia will have diluted an important institution that seeks to uphold its scientific integrity, Zelenika says. ■