

CSIRO 'gagging climate debate'

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CSIRO managers are narrowly interpreting the agency's charter to effectively ban scientists from publishing any critique of emissions trading schemes, in a decision that has sparked alarm among the organisation's climate change experts.

The move comes amid a crackdown by the CSIRO on public comments by scientists in their personal capacity.

The organisation began rolling out a new public comment policy three weeks ago that limits what scientists can say publicly about issues within their area of expertise.

The new policy forbids scientists from making comments, even in their private capacity, if the remarks might affect "public confidence in CSIRO as a trusted adviser". If such a perception could arise, scientists are required to discuss the issue with their supervisor to "effectively manage risks".

Scientists told *The Australian* yesterday the vague wording of the policy meant they would be forced to seek permission before making any public comments, even if the comments were not associated with the CSIRO.

The rollout of the new policy comes after CSIRO scientists gave evidence earlier this year to a Senate inquiry into climate change. Some managers were unhappy with the media coverage that followed.

And it follows a dispute with CSIRO economist Clive Spash, whose paper on emissions trading schemes has been banned from publication.

CSIRO spokesman Huw Morgan said the new document did not change existing policy, merely clarified it.

CSIRO staff association secretary Sam Popovski met officials yesterday to raise concerns about Dr Spash's treatment by senior managers.

Dr Spash said this week he felt harassed after he received a strongly worded letter outlining a list of trivial breaches of CSIRO policies, such as not filling out a leave form properly. This was sent 24 hours after he received a letter regarding the decision to ban his paper.

CSIRO chief executive Megan Clark is reviewing the decision to ban Dr Spash's paper, but reasons for the ban became clearer yesterday for the first time.

The head of the CSIRO's sustainable ecosystems group, Daniel Walker, decided to block the publication of the paper because it commented on government policy.

Dr Walker told Dr Spash that any critique of emissions trading schemes in general breached the CSIRO's charter, which states that scientists are not permitted to "debate the merits of government policy".

The charter was praised by Science Minister Kim Carr last year as a means of protecting academic freedoms.

Senator Carr told The Australian scientists should be able to contribute their personal opinions to public debate.

"Individual opinions should be subject to debate, and as I've always said science is contestable," he said.

"People have the right to be wrong."

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/csiro-gagging-climate-debate/story-e6frg8gf-1225794500655>