

CSIRO moves to put gag on scientists

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THE CSIRO has sought to secretly close a loophole that allows scientists to publish research and comment in their private capacity about politically sensitive issues.

Earlier this year, senior scientists used the loophole to give evidence to a Senate inquiry criticising the Rudd government's emissions targets. While the CSIRO has denied it has reviewed or changed its public comment policy, a confidential memo leaked to The Australian reveals the policy has been reviewed at the highest levels.

It is understood the memo was sent by three staff members on June 9, after they learned CSIRO chief executive Megan Clark and head of communications John Curran were reviewing the policy.

Sent to Dr Curran, the memo evaluated options for change, including the "risks" of preventing scientists from speaking out in their personal capacity. The memo warned CSIRO would receive "negative feedback" and leaks to the media if it tried to eliminate the "pressure valve" option of allowing scientists to speak out on contentious issues in their personal capacity.

Calling for consultation with those "at the coal face", it also warned that if the policy were changed so soon after the Senate inquiry, "CSIRO could be perceived internally and externally as trying to shut down dissent".

The CSIRO began rolling out a new publications policy three weeks ago without warning scientists. The policy, which the CSIRO has refused to release, effectively gags scientists from speaking out in their private capacity, by insisting they use their agency affiliation on all publications or commentaries arising from their CSIRO research.

It also states that if scientists intend to comment on matters in their area of expertise, they must first discuss the "risks" with their manager, including where "public confidence in CSIRO as a trusted adviser" might be compromised.

CSIRO staff association president Michael Borgas said: "The impact of the new policy is to prevent scientists making statements as private citizens about expertise that they have as CSIRO scientists."

Former CSIRO climate science chief Graeme Pearman said: "In an ideal democracy, where you have taxpayers investing their money in research, you want scientists to be able to say what the hell they've found.

"It should not be based on some ideological or political view of what is correct or incorrect -- that's not in the interest of the Australian community."

Dr Pearman, who was reprimanded in 2004 for commenting on the need to set greenhouse targets, said there was a strong public interest in debate.

Controversy over the new policy comes as Dr Clark today meets CSIRO economist Clive Spash to review a decision to gag his paper criticising emissions trading schemes.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/csiro-moves-to-put-gag-on-scientists/story-e6frg6nf-1225795565498>