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Scientist claims censorship on climate paper

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A CSIRO scientist claims to be facing censorship over a paper critical of government policy on Emissions Trading. The CSIRO says it's not censorship, but the paper did not pass through proper channels for approval. The CSIRO staff association worries that there's pressure within the organisation to avoid controversy.

Shane McLeod

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ELEANOR HALL: Australia's top scientific agency has rejected accusations that it is censoring its employee's reports. An environmental economist at the CSIRO says he's being told not to publish a paper on climate change because it challenges Government policy.

But the CSIRO says it's not trying to censor the scientist and is still reviewing the case. Fears are being expressed though both inside and outside the agency that it's self-censoring to avoid controversy and to safeguard its funding.

Shane McLeod has our report.

SHANE MCLEOD: Dr Clive Spash is an ecological economist. He's worked for the CSIRO since 2006, specialising in the interactions between the environment and the economy. As well as extensive details of his career, and multimedia presentations...

CLIVE SPASH: I've worked in various different countries around the world and lived in different countries.

SHANE MCLEOD: On Dr Spash's personal website you'll also find a list of academic papers and publications he's contributed to but there's one you won't find, and if the CSIRO has its way, you never will.

In it, Dr Spash argues that carbon trading, like the emissions trading scheme being promoted by the Federal Government, appears to be ineffective in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. He says more direct measures, like a carbon tax or new infrastructure, would be simpler and more effective.

Earlier this year Dr Spash submitted the article for publication in a UK journal, "New Political Economy" but in July, the CSIRO wrote to the editors, telling them the paper was being withdrawn, because it had not been approved through internal CSIRO processes.

The World Today understands Dr Spash has been told not to publish the paper, because of political sensitivities. The CSIRO denies it's trying to censor Dr Spash. A spokesman says there's a long-standing policy of not publishing papers and reports that comment on policy, be it Government, or Opposition, or even that of a local council.

The spokesman says Dr Spash's paper is now being reviewed by the organisation's chief executive, Dr Megan Clark and she's put her views about public comments by scientists on the record as recently as last month in an interview on the ABC's Sunday Profile.

MEGAN CLARK: I'm encouraging our scientists to speak to the public. We're training our scientists to do that and they have my personal backing. With it of course comes responsibility and of course responsibility to make sure that we adhere to one of the most fundamental values of the organisation, which is the integrity of our excellent science.

MONICA ATTARD: So in other words, if the CSIRO suddenly became aware or came to a conclusion, scientifically, that for example an ETS was not the right way to go, you'd have no problems in putting that out in the public domain?

MEGAN CLARK: The science? Absolutely. Our modelling will be out in the public domain. Our science will be out in the public domain.

SHANE MCLEOD: And it's that distinction - between science and policy - that's at the centre of the dispute over Dr Spash's paper.

Dr Michael Borgas is president of the CSIRO staff association. He says scientists understand the policy not to comment on policy but he says the line is becoming blurred.

MICHAEL BORGAS: They are certainly very aware of the opinions they give from the organisation as a CSIRO, as part of, an arm of government if you like, are meant not to comment on policy decisions of either the Government or the Opposition.

The overlap between policy and science is getting extremely close in these issues. We've come to an interesting point in history where much of the science is telling us that we do have to worry about the finiteness of things and that includes climate change and that means working out how to manage things and deal with policies for a sustainable future.

SHANE MCLEOD: Dr Borgas says some scientists worry that self-censorship is at play.

MICHAEL BORGAS: There is a concern about the public comment possible from scientists in the organisation at the moment and a feeling of some pressure being brought to bear on the middle management of the organisation to avoid risks.

SHANE MCLEOD: So it is not political pressure, it is not from the Government for example?

MICHAEL BORGAS: We've asked questions about this at high levels and have had assurances that much of the risk that is perceived here is in the imaginations of management.

SHANE MCLEOD: The World Today's attempts this morning to contact Dr Spash have been unsuccessful.

ELEANOR HALL: Shane McLeod reporting.