

News

Australian agency denies gagging researchers

Furore over decision to pull scientist's carbon trading critique from journal.

Stephen Pincock

Australia's national science agency, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), has this week denied accusations that it is preventing researchers from publishing work on politically-sensitive issues such as climate change.

Clive Spash, an ecological economist, had a paper on emissions trading schemes accepted for publication in the journal *New Political Economy* earlier this year. In it, he reportedly argues that carbon trading is ineffective in reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. But the CSIRO subsequently wrote to the editors telling them that the paper was being withdrawn because it had not passed internal processes.

"After the article had been accepted for publication and I had informed the acting chief of the division, two weeks later he informed me that the article could not be published," Spash told ABC radio on Thursday.

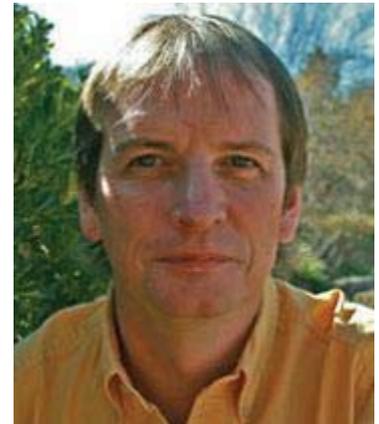
CSIRO rules give researchers freedom to discuss their research results, but say they "should not advocate, defend or publicly debate the merits of government or opposition policies". Emissions trading schemes are among the most hotly debated policies in the country at present, with the government hoping to pass legislation in the face of stiff opposition in coming weeks.

"Publishing data is fine. It's when you get into comment or passing judgement on government policy that you run into problems," said CSIRO spokesman Huw Morgan.

Policy commentary

Spash's paper seems to have included data and comment. An **extract** published by *The Australian* newspaper says that carbon trading schemes were politically popular despite being ineffective. "The public appearance is that action is being undertaken. The reality is that [greenhouse gasses] are increasing and society is avoiding the need for substantive proposals to address the problem of behavioural and structural change."

Spash made his complaints public last week, first at a scientific conference, and then through the media. "There's a real issue here about people working in the socio-economic area," he told one reporter. "It's not at all clear to me how these people are supposed to work and do their job while trying to meet these general guidance principles that have been interpreted at present to say that we're not allowed to comment on any government policy at any level of government, anywhere in the world."



Clive Spash believes CSIRO rules that govern what scientists can say publicly are flawed.

CSIRO

No censorship

Science minister Kim Carr told *Nature* that he did not think this was a case of censorship, and that the government welcomed public debate on emissions trading schemes.

"We are not the slightest bit concerned about people publishing different views to the government," he said. "At no point have I seen this paper, at no point has the Government said we don't want it published. We've indicated on many occasions that this research will be published."



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*Kim Carr
Science minister, Australian
government*

Morgan confirmed that Megan Clark, CSIRO chief executive, planned to work with Spash and his managers to get the data published. *Nature* has been unable to contact Spash for comment because he is currently on leave.

The rules governing how CSIRO scientists can communicate publicly were enshrined in a charter signed by Carr in November last year. At the time, Carr said the document was designed to restore confidence among researchers who had grown wary. "Under the previous government some research was censored and many researchers did not feel free to take part in public debate," he said.

But the current situation is reminding some climate scientists of earlier episodes, says CSIRO staff association secretary Sam Popovski. "The CSIRO charter in itself is a positive document, but it only establishes a framework," he says. "Things have been improving and this is definitely a setback."

Difficult line

The problem seems to have been more to do with management styles and conservative interpretation of the rules, rather than political pressure, says Popovski. "I think [CSIRO] have taken an overly risk-averse stance on this."

That's a view supported by other scientists. "There's nothing sinister," says Anna-Maria Arabia, executive director of the Federation of Australian Scientific Societies, a body representing Australian scientists. "I don't think we've got a government here saying you can't publish things that contradict our policies." ADVERTISEMENT

CSIRO's view has long been that its scientists are free to speak publicly about the results of their research, but not to comment on matters of policy, she says. "Implementing that policy can be tricky. I think it is difficult sometimes to draw the line."

UPDATED: *This article has been updated to remove a statement made by Popovski. In it, Popovski says that Spash had sent the paper to the journal knowing that it had not been approved, after becoming frustrated with the slowness of the internal processes and discussions over the wording of the paper. Popovski has since contacted Nature to say that his statement was based on incorrect information and he wishes to withdraw it.*