

Australian agency moves to calm climate row

Researcher will be allowed to publish his paper after making 'tiny' changes.

Stephen Pincock

An Australian researcher involved in a censorship controversy will be allowed to publish a paper critical of cap-and-trade systems for controlling carbon emissions — but only after some changes are made to wording, the country's science agency has said.

Clive Spash, an ecological economist at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) in Canberra, had an invited paper on the failings of emissions-trading schemes accepted by the journal *New Political Economy* earlier this year. But the acting chief of his division subsequently wrote to the editors telling them that the paper was being withdrawn because it had not passed internal processes (see ['Australian agency denies gagging researchers'](#)).



Publication of a paper on cap-and-trade has been held up by CSIRO.

Malcolm Paterson/CSIRO

With Australia's government battling to pass emissions legislation, accusations that the agency was trying to muzzle climate researchers made headlines.

But after Spash met with CSIRO chief executive Megan Clark on 9 November, the two reached an agreement that the paper could be published with some rewording. "We had a productive talk," Spash says. "I was told by the chief executive that her changes would be tiny, consisting of a few words or phrases. That sounds as if it would be acceptable."

A spokesman for the agency, Huw Morgan, confirmed that Clark told Spash the article was publishable under CSIRO rules with "minor but important" changes. He said Spash would see the proposed changes by close of business today.

Chopping and changing

The issue centres on the charter under which the CSIRO, a statutory authority, operates. That charter allows agency researchers to discuss their results, but says they "should not advocate, defend or publicly debate the merits of government or opposition policies".

Spash told *Nature* that Clark agreed with "my own opinion that the paper did not breach the CSIRO charter or policy in any substantive fashion. This reversed the decision statements previously issued to me by senior managers wishing to cut 75% or more of the paper."

The paper analyses emissions-trading schemes, economists' claims for them, and the implications of their design. "There is no detail on, nor analysis of, the current proposals by the Australian government or opposition parties," says Spash.



“The paper was therefore submitted to the journal, with the express permission of the acting chief of division.”

*Clive Spash
CSIRO*

When he first alerted his CSIRO bosses to the paper, they considered it to be politically sensitive and in need of robust review, Spash said. Normally, papers produced by the agency are reviewed internally before being sent for external review. But Spash says he and his co-author Andrew Reeson were told they should send the paper straight away for review by the journal even though the internal review had not concluded.

"The paper was therefore submitted to the journal, with the express permission of the acting chief of division, prior to completion of the internal referee's reports," Spash adds. "Both internal referees recommended publication a few weeks after submission to the journal."

Spash says the journal accepted a revised version of the paper in June. He told the acting division chief this, but two weeks later was informed that the article could not be published.

Speak truth to power?

The episode has caused debate in Australia about whether CSIRO scientists should have the same freedoms as university academics.

Michael Borgas, president of the CSIRO's staff association, has backed the current system, telling *The Australian* newspaper that most of the agency's researchers "find they are helped by CSIRO to directly engage with the political process by getting their research into the heads of [ministers and the bureaucracy], rather than by publishing in academic journals".

Meanwhile, CSIRO has moved to further tighten its grip on scientists' freedom to speak out, rolling out a new policy over recent weeks that requires researchers "to use their CSIRO affiliation on all publications that arise from research work they do as an employee with CSIRO," spokesman Huw Morgan said. Morgan said it would be extended across the agency by early 2010.

Spash hopes his case will highlight the need for openness and public engagement. ADVERTISEMENT
"This does not mean scientists becoming political activists or advocates," he says.
"It does mean being prepared to make and defend logical arguments and being prepared to explore moral and ethical issues."

"Institutions are today facing the reality of a new mode of operation at the science–policy interface," he adds. "My hope is that recent events have shown they must grasp this challenge rather than falling back into a mode of operation which is long outdated."