

Researcher quits over science agency interference

Australian research funding body under fire for ordering major changes to a peer-reviewed paper.

Stephen Pincock

Australia's national science agency has been accused of trying to substantially alter a peer-reviewed paper that was critical of carbon-trading schemes, leading a prominent researcher to quit the agency this week.

"I've had enough," ecological economist Clive Spash told *Nature*. "My health was suffering. There is only so much bullying and harassment one person can take."

Spash had been invited to submit a paper on emissions trading to a special issue of the journal *New Political Economy*. It was peer reviewed and accepted for publication, but subsequently withdrawn after his managers at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) decided that it breached rules preventing the agency's scientists from commenting on government policy (see '[Australian agency denies gagging researchers](#)').

The paper was subsequently published in the proceedings of a conference in October, which CSIRO's chief executive Megan Clark later said was a breach of "fundamental CSIRO standards". After the affair became public, the CSIRO said Spash would be allowed to publish his paper with what the agency spokesman said were "minor but important" changes (see '[Australian agency moves to calm climate row](#)').

Spash resigned on 2 December, just days after those changes were outlined. "Dr Spash was always encouraged to publish his work," said Clarke in a statement. "This issue has never been about stifling debate or censorship. The key issues that have been at play are the quality of the science and how it is communicated."

A question of independence

But John O'Neill from the University of Manchester, UK, a member of the *New Political Economy* editorial board, disagrees.

In a letter sent to Australia's science minister Kim Carr this week, he writes: "When Dr Spash sent us a copy of the suggested changes to the paper, it became clear that the CSIRO is asking not for minor but for major changes in the central arguments of the paper. This is clearly unacceptable to the author. I should add that is also unacceptable to me as the editor of the special issue. It involves



Clive Spash has battled with Australia's national science agency over a controversial paper.

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interference in our own peer-reviewing procedures that would be incompatible with the academic integrity of the journal."

According to O'Neill, the original paper argued that emissions-trading schemes will not solve, and potentially could exacerbate, the problem of human-induced climate change. "The version as rewritten by the chief executive of the CSIRO and her staff wants him to argue for a weaker position, that any problems with emissions trading are a matter of design," he writes. "If the chief executive of the CSIRO wants to argue for a different position to that of Dr Clive Spash she can do so by publicly replying to the paper and presenting arguments for the contrary position."

"What is clearly improper is for her to use her position to insist on changes to the paper which alter its conclusions prior to publication."

Spash says that the affair reflects wider problems within the agency. "CSIRO ADVERTISEMENT cannot continue to operate as an organization which favours some and not others due to their policy opinions, or position within the organization."

Clark argues that the CSIRO actively encourages its staff to debate the latest science and its implications and to analyse policy options. "However, under our charter, we do not advocate for or against specific government or opposition policies," she said in a statement. "The CSIRO Charter protects the independence of our science. It also protects CSIRO scientists from being exploited in the political process."

"My role as chief executive of the CSIRO is to ensure the integrity and independence of our science is maintained. That's not something I am prepared to compromise on."