



Report In Brief

U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General

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Why We Did this Review

In 2006, several journal and online articles alleged that the Department and NOAA had delayed release of a research report on climate change and hurricane intensity. At the same time, NOAA and NASA scientists were complaining that their climate studies were being suppressed. A September 2006 letter from 14 senators to the Commerce and NASA inspectors general expressed concerns about possible suppression, and asked if Commerce had blocked release of a hurricane/global warming report. In response, we assessed Commerce policies regarding public release of research data, and the events surrounding the purported report.

Background

In November 2005, NOAA published an article in its online *NOAA Magazine* contending that according to NOAA research, natural occurring cycles in tropical climate were the cause of increased Atlantic hurricane activity since 1995, not the greenhouse effect of global warming. The statement drew criticism from some NOAA scientists, who believed it failed to reflect the full spectrum of the agency's research on hurricanes and global warming. In response, NOAA decided in January 2006 to prepare a fact sheet that would present a balanced view of the agency's hurricane/climate change research. The fact sheet was approved in May 2006, but was not released until the following September.

View the full report at www.oig.doc.gov/oig/reports/2008/BSD-18407.pdf.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Personnel Inaction and Process Breakdowns Delayed NOAA's Release of Fact Sheet, But Policies Have Been Clarified (BSD-18407)

What We Found

We determined the document NOAA allegedly withheld was not a report containing new research but a two-page "state of the science" hurricane fact sheet that the agency had decided to issue in response to its own researchers' concerns about the 2005 online *NOAA Magazine* article on hurricane intensity and climate change. The fact sheet did not contain new science but was an overview of various scientific opinions within NOAA. We attributed the delay in publishing the document to three principal factors:

1. Changes in senior-level personnel at NOAA overseeing the fact sheet's development and distribution, which resulted in a lack of senior-level attention at NOAA.
2. Submission of the document through informal review channels.
3. Inaction by a senior policy advisor who provided limited assistance to NOAA in obtaining departmental clearance for the fact sheet despite being sent at least 6 drafts over a 4-month period.

We also found that at the time NOAA had prepared the fact sheet and initiated the approval process, it was operating under Commerce and NOAA communications policies that were out of date, confusing, and burdensome, and that contained conflicting guidance. These policy deficiencies resulted in delays in disseminating press releases and scientific research. The Department updated its communications policy in May 2007. NOAA issued a formal policy for preparing fact sheets that is consistent with the Department's new policy. Both give specific guidance for sharing findings from fundamental research. However, NOAA has not incorporated the fact sheet policy into the agency's directives system or publicized it agencywide.

What We Recommended

We recommended that

1. procedures developed for preparing fact sheets be incorporated into NOAA's directives system and posted to the NOAA web site, and
2. state of the science fact sheets that should be approved by the Department are routed to the Office of the Secretary Executive Secretariat.