

Statement of Dr. Virginia Burkett

July 25, 2024

This week I filed a whistleblower complaint with the United States Office of Special Counsel and the Inspector General of the Department of the Interior (“DOI”). My complaint details several events occurring between 2017 and 2020, including the dismantling of the United States Geological Survey (“USGS”) Climate and Land Use Change Mission Area and attempts by political appointees to alter scientific reports within the DOI and the US Global Change Research Program. It also describes how my vocal defense of the USGS budget and climate science led to my subsequent reassignment and demotion.

In my complaint, I explain the events leading to the “Black Friday” release of the Fourth National Climate Assessment in 2018. During that time, I led a successful interagency effort to prevent last minute alterations to the report’s Summary Findings by political appointees at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. These proposed changes would have drastically misrepresented the work of more than 300 federal and academic scientists in a report that had been through extensive peer, public and National Academies review. After opposing the inappropriate edits, I was informed by the USGS Director at that time that I had become a “target,” as the both the Secretary of Interior and White House were displeased. In the subsequent year, several retaliatory actions were taken against me, including my removal as chair of the committee that leads the US Global Change Research Program.

I appealed to my Human Resources Office and the USGS Office of Scientific Quality and Integrity as these events unfolded. In 2021, I reported my experience to the new Secretary of Interior and USGS leadership. From 2022 to present, the USGS and many other federal science agencies strengthened their scientific integrity policies. These new policies focus on preventing scientific misconduct and political interference in scientific activities, including the communication of scientific results. They largely do not cover harassment and retaliation against scientists who step forward to disclose wrongs or prevent a loss of scientific integrity. Despite the recent progress, I fear not enough has been done to protect federal scientists, which is why I am speaking out now.

Without question, my Whistleblower filing details the most difficult period of my fifty-year career of academic, state, and federal service. I am asking for an independent, external review of the events that are documented in my complaint and an evaluation of safeguards that have been established, if any, since I reported these events to departmental leadership. I am seeking reforms, specifically, in the structure and operation of the Department’s Executive Resources Board.¹ I further ask for procedural changes in the handling of harassment complaints that involve DOI political appointees. Finally, I am asking for the establishment of a department-wide policy that articulates the role of DOI political appointees in the development and

¹See Reassignment of Senior Executives at the U.S. Department of the Interior, No. 2017-ER-061, Office of Inspector General (Interior Dec. April 9, 2018), www.doi.gov/reports/evaluation/reassignment-senior-executives-us-department-interior, at 5.

communication of scientific findings, in addition to the development of supporting procedures and examples of inappropriate political interference.²

My goal is to ensure that the harassment, retaliation, and injustices I endured are never experienced by another USGS scientist or public servant within the Department of Interior.

² This mirrors a recommendation from the National Academy of Public Administration's review of the 2019 event, referred in the media as "Sharpie-gate," in which political appointees violated the agency's scientific integrity policy by issuing statements contradicting the National Weather Service's forecasts about Hurricane Dorian landfall.

[NAPA independent-assessment-of-allegations-of-scientific-misconduct-noaa/NOAA_Scientific_Integrity_Final_Report_Redacted.pdf](https://www.napa.gov/~/media/Files/Reports/NOAA_Scientific_Integrity_Final_Report_Redacted.pdf)