

Smithsonian to improve ethics policies on research funding

June 26 2015, by Brett Zongker

After revelations that a scientist failed to disclose his funding sources for climate change research, the Smithsonian Institution said Friday it is improving its ethics and disclosure policies to avoid conflicts of interest.

The museum and research complex said it is prepared to take immediate action after a review of its policies by Rita Colwell, the former director of the National Science Foundation. Smithsonian officials initiated the external review after recent allegations that scientist Wei-Hock Soon did not disclose conflicts of interest in his [research funding](#). A Smithsonian team also conducted an internal review.

Both reviews found the Smithsonian's policies to be "generally consistent" with academic best practices, but they also found that the Smithsonian should strengthen and update its policies and procedures.

Based on Colwell's recommendations, the Smithsonian will require staff to disclose all sources of research funding in connection with any publication, regardless of an individual journal or publisher's disclosure requirements.

The Smithsonian also will begin reviewing all research grants and awards when they are proposed for conflicts of interest. All researchers will be included in a modernized and automated disclosure program, adding an additional 150 researchers to the process. Finally, the Smithsonian also will implement a single set of baseline terms and conditions to govern publishing of research findings.

"I trust these findings and recommendations will prove useful to the Smithsonian," Colwell said in a statement. "The Smithsonian will be setting the highest standard in this regard."

Colwell is a professor at the University of Maryland at College Park and at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In February, The New York Times reported researcher Soon of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, failed to fully disclose \$1.2 million from the fossil-fuel industry, including oil and coal-burning companies, while publishing papers casting doubt on the impact of greenhouse gases in causing climate change. Documents obtained by the environmental group Greenpeace showed some corporate contributions were tied specifically to papers Soon wrote in exchange for the money.

Soon's published work often has been cited by politicians seeking to block legislation on climate change. His findings claim variations in the sun's energy can explain global warming. Many scientists disagree with his conclusions.

Soon is still employed part-time with the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and pursues external sources of funding to support his research, including his salary. Smithsonian officials have said they are concerned about the allegations over Soon's funding and said it became a personnel matter.

The Smithsonian has issued a statement saying it does not support Soon's conclusions on climate change. The Smithsonian's official position on [climate change](#) points to human activities as a cause of [global warming](#).

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