

# Canada to probe alleged 'muzzling' of scientists

2 April 2013

Canada's information commissioner on Tuesday launched an investigation into allegations that the federal government is muzzling its scientists, a spokeswoman for the commissioner said.

An academic report from the University of Victoria says the Conservative government has stopped some government researchers from discussing their studies on prehistoric floods, the 2011 Arctic Ozone hole, and snow research.

Spokeswoman Josée Villeneuve said Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault is investigating a complaint alleging that policies that restrict government scientists from speaking about their work to the media and public violates the Access to Information Act.

The office of Gary Goodyear, the minister of state for science and technology, said government scientists are readily available to share their research with the media and the public. A statement from the office said Environment Canada participated in more than 1,300 media interviews, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada issued nearly 1,000 scientific publications, and Natural Resources Canada published nearly 500 studies last year.

The complaint was launched by the Environmental Law Centre at the University of Victoria and ethics advocacy group Democracy Watch.

Democracy Watch's Duff Conacher said the issue isn't the number of documents produced and studies undertaken that what is at issue is the percentage of documents being released.

Chris Tollefson, the executive director of the University of Victoria's law center, said their research into suppressed science revealed both the wide scope of the practice and that it "represents a significant departure" in government practice over the last five to seven years.

Tollenfson said the health of the country's democracy is at stake if the public doesn't know what the best science is to make difficult decisions about policy.

Information commissioner spokeswoman Villeneuve said Legault is investigating seven government departments in relation to the complaint: Environment, Fisheries and Oceans, Natural Resources, National Defence, the Treasury Board Secretariat, National Research Council of Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

A report by the Environmental Law Centre at the University of Victoria Democracy Watch says that the Conservative government has stopped some government researchers from discussing their studies on prehistoric floods, the 2011 Arctic Ozone hole, and snow research.

The report, "Muzzling Civil Servants: A Threat to Democracy," cites federal documents that detail how the government has implemented policies that "routinely require political approval before scientists can speak to the media about their scientific findings."

Government scientists are often "instructed to not speak publicly - or to respond with pre-scripted 'approved lines,'" said the report.

Democracy Watch is calling for a number of key government policy changes including severe penalties for not creating records, for not maintaining records properly, and for unjustifiable delays in responses to information requests.

Tyler Sommers, Coordinator of Democracy Watch, said the advocacy group will continue to push for what he called democratic changes to Canada's access to information law.

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