



FREE
EXPRESSION
MATTERS

April 18, 2012

Prime Minister Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street Ottawa
Ontario K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

I write to you as president of the Canadian centre of PEN International, the world's oldest literary and human rights organization, to share PEN Canada's concerns about the federal government's policy towards the communication of issues related to publicly funded science.

In 2007, the federal government introduced rules to control interviews with Environment Canada scientists. In March 2010 Climate Action Network Canada reported that these rules had resulted in an 80 per cent drop in media coverage of climate change science. More recently, several incidents have shown the government's willingness to impose conditions on the public release of scientific research that appears to contradict government policy. Three well-documented cases showcase the seriousness of this development:

- 1) The federally appointed Cohen Commission has been investigating the 2009 collapse of Fraser River sockeye. One possible cause is a virus spread by contaminated farmed fish that escape and infect wild stocks. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has resisted this explanation, apparently because it could trigger increased regulation of fish farming and affect its economic viability. Molecular geneticist Dr. Kristi Miller, who runs a Fisheries Department research laboratory in Nanaimo, detected the virus. The results of her research were published in January 2011 in *Science*, a prestigious scholarly journal, but the Fisheries Department banned her from speaking to the press about it. Last December Dr. Miller told the Cohen Commission she was intimidated and

alienated within the Fisheries Department as a result of her work.

2) In March 2011 a study published in the scientific journal *Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management* concluded that toxic air emissions in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut are unregulated by land-use permits and water licences. The Canadian Press reported that one of the authors, an employee of Environment Canada, said he was happy to discuss his findings with reporters. Before that could happen Environment Canada communications staff said in an email that an interview was “not possible.”

3) Dr. David Tarasick works for Environment Canada. Tarasick was one of four authors of a study describing a huge hole in the ozone layer above the Arctic, published in October 2011 in the British scientific journal *Nature*. Tarasick was prevented by Environment Canada from talking to the press, apparently because the government intends to reduce funding for the country’s atmospheric monitoring network and was concerned it would be criticized for doing so.

On February 16, 2012 a joint letter from l’Association des communicateurs scientifiques du Québec (ACS), l’Association science et bien commun (ASBC), Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE), Canadian Science Writers’ Association (CSWA), The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC) and the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ) raised these and similar concerns with your office directly. The joint letter pointed out that:

...federal scientists in Canada are still not allowed to speak to reporters without the “consent” of media relations officers. Delays in obtaining interviews are often unacceptable and journalists are routinely denied interviews. Increasingly, journalists have simply given up trying to access federal scientists, while scientists at work in federal departments are under undue pressure in an atmosphere dominated by political messaging.

Two weeks later, an editorial in the prestigious journal *Nature* noted that in Canada:

Policy directives and e-mails obtained from the government through freedom of information reveal a confused and Byzantine approach to the press, prioritizing message control and showing little understanding of the importance of the free flow of scientific knowledge.

... *Nature's* news reporters, who have an obvious interest in access to scientific information and expert opinion, have experienced directly the cumbersome approval process that stalls or prevents meaningful contact with Canada's publicly funded scientists.

... Canada's generally positive foreign reputation as a progressive, scientific nation masks some startlingly poor behaviour.

PEN Canada believes such interference with disinterested, publicly funded inquiry constitutes an infringement of freedom of expression in Canada. We support the call for transparent access to publicly funded science and a lifting of the chill between government scientists and the national media.

We are also concerned that as long as these restrictions remain in place, Canadian scientists will be obliged to operate under the now widespread suspicion that government-funded science in this country is captive to political interests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charlie Foran". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Charlie" and "Foran" being capitalized and prominent.

Charlie Foran,
President, PEN Canada