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From the Baltimore Sun

Saving science from politicians

By Wendy Wagner and Rena Steinzor

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The election that captured headlines last month was Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman's defeat in Connecticut, but the race that interested us was in Kansas, where voters ousted two state school board incumbents, tipping the balance on the board back toward teaching evolution in the public schools. It was a rare victory for science in the realm of politics.

Sadly, the integrity of science doesn't count for as much as it should where politicians are involved - and not just on state school boards. The Bush administration and its conservative allies in Congress and industry have routinely and systematically curbed scientists' independence by reshaping, rewriting and suppressing scientific analysis that is inconsistent with the heavily political agendas of special interests, from chemical and oil companies to the religious right.

A case in point is the Food and Drug Administration's recent but long-delayed approval of Plan B - the so-called morning-after pill - for over-the-counter sales, in response to a petition several years ago from the drug's manufacturer. FDA's various professional and scientific arms, including the expert scientific advisory panel in charge of reviewing the safety and efficacy of over-the-counter medications and reproductive drugs, recommended approval. Yet FDA's political officials ignored the final, overwhelming vote by those scientists, instead rejecting the petition at the behest of religious fundamentalists. Only under intense pressure did the political appointees finally get out of the way of the scientists and medical professionals and approve the petition.

Other examples of the administration's disrespect for science and the scientific community are legion. They include:

- Editing, by White House staff, of a scientific assessment of global warming in an Environmental Protection Agency report to Congress.
- Playing down the causes, evidence and danger of global warming.
- Revising a National Cancer Institute Web site to suggest that women who have had abortions are more

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likely to have breast cancer (an assertion unsupported by science).

- Stacking government agencies' various scientific advisory committees with pro-industry scientists or with candidates with scant scientific experience but impeccable ideological credentials.

Meanwhile, some administration allies have taken to harassing scientists whose findings threaten industry profit.

One internationally recognized global-warming expert, professor Michael Mann of the University of Virginia, had to spend hundreds of hours away from his research when Rep. Joe L. Barton, a Texas Republican, demanded detailed responses to a lengthy series of questions drawn from a critique of his research produced not by scientists but by an economist and a businessman. The National Academy of Sciences and others protested Mr. Barton's demand, but the expert, whose work had been replicated and peer-reviewed, still had to submit to Mr. Barton's congressional subpoena.

With the powers-that-be showing such disrespect for science, Kansas-style victories for science over ideology are all the more important. But cleaning up the damage done to science over the last few years requires more than sending a few school board members packing. The problem goes beyond the White House, the executive agencies and Congress; in the courts, scientific research and analysis are increasingly subject to interference and ideological assault.

Fixing the problem requires, first and foremost, a new commitment from all players to quit treating uncertainties in scientific research as justification for inaction on public health, environmental protection, worker safety and the approval of new drugs. Science informs policy decisions, and research must be as good and complete as possible. But decision-makers should take responsibility for what they do or fail to do, and stop hiding behind claims that "the science isn't there yet" to defer action.

Specific reforms are in order, too. They include the insulation of research from inappropriate pressure from interested parties, including political appointees and industry; legal reforms to protect scientists from baseless litigation aimed at punishing them for their findings; increased funding for research so that important but underresearched issues (such as the effects of pesticides) are explored even if industry would rather they not be; and insistence by regulatory agencies that scientists submitting research for rulemaking procedures disclose any conflicts of interest - paychecks from the regulated industry, for example.

Many of the immediate risks from politicizing science are clear: chief among them, harm to public health and the environment because of the failure to adopt needed safeguards against a variety of hazards. But the long-term threat is that by treating scientific findings as if they were just another piece of political rhetoric - something to be attacked, suppressed and abused rather than respected - we devalue the importance of scientific exploration. Kansas voters sent an important message in that regard this summer. Let's hope others follow suit.

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