

Flint Scientist: ‘Perverse Incentives’ Prevent Academics from Criticizing Government

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Academic bias in favor of government is a real problem according to the professor who sounded the alarm on Flint, Michigan’s lead contamination crisis.

That Virginia Tech civil engineering professor, Marc Edwards, criticized academia for its reluctance to criticize government and decried what he called “perverse incentives” preventing academics from criticizing government agencies that fund their research.

“Academic research and scientists in this country are no longer deserving of the public trust,” Edwards complained in a Q and A with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

“When was the last time you heard anyone in academia publicly criticize a funding agency, no matter how outrageous their behavior? We just don’t do these things,” he said.

How could that be? According to Edwards, life in academia was like “a hedonistic treadmill” where professors raced to get research published and cited. In order to do so, academics can’t upset their government funders.

“Everyone’s invested in just cranking out more crap papers,” Edwards said. The phenomena shocked Edwards, who told the *Chronicle*, “I grew up worshipping at the altar of science, and in my wildest dreams I never thought scientists would behave this way.”

He also warned that scientists aren’t “skeptical” enough about fellow scientists’ findings.

Some of the problems Edwards criticized are similar to arguments made by scientists skeptical of the so-called “consensus” on global warming and the funding of alarmist science.

Patrick Michaels, the Director of Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute, and former consultant for the U.S. Department of Energy David Wojik, looked into how federally funded research might bias scientific literature.

Michaels and Wojik argued in a 2015 working paper that the nature of government-funded research suggested that it might be biased.

“The Federal Government funds a lot of research, most of it directly related to agency missions, programs and paradigms. In some areas, especially regulatory science, Federal funding is by far the dominant source. Clearly the potential for funding-induced bias exists in these cases,” Michaels and Wojik wrote.

The authors criticized the US Global Change Research Program (USGCRP), which is an “inter-agency coordination effort that includes most of the climate science research programs run by thirteen different federal agencies.”

“Today the paradigm of human-caused (or anthropogenic) dangerous warming is being seriously questioned, but the USGCRP still maintains the old paradigm,” Michaels and Wojik pointed out.

Specifically, the authors found that a section that showed just how the bias is possible: “Page 30 of the FY 2015 budget report says ‘These investments in global change research will support implementation of the actions laid out in the President's Climate Action Plan,’ indicating that the research will support the policy, rather than being scientifically independent.”

The authors discussed other allegations of bias and concluded that the issue of “systemic bias” because of government funding has not been studied enough.

They warned that “... if this sort of bias is indeed widespread then there is a serious need for new policies to prevent it, both at the Federal level and within the scientific community itself.”