



Jane Lubchenco

Cross-posted at [CPRBlog](#).

NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco has announced that she will leave her post at the end of February. Her letter to NOAA employees, [reprinted in the Washington Post](#), cites the difficulty of maintaining a bi-coastal family life. Dr. Lubchenco, a distinguished marine biologist, has put in four years at the helm of NOAA, as much time as reasonably could be expected.

She was one of President Obama's earliest nominees, named before his inauguration as part of a "dream team" of distinguished research scientists he brought into high-level government service in partial fulfillment of his inaugural promise [to restore science to its rightful place](#). While that promise remains, in my view, unfulfilled, it hasn't been for lack of trying on Lubchenco's part. Of NOAA's accomplishments during her tenure, the one I attribute most directly to her influence is adoption of a strong [scientific integrity policy](#). The White House mandated that federal agencies develop scientific integrity policies, but [provided precious little guidance](#) or leadership. Most agencies simply imported research misconduct policies, essentially putting the entire onus of ensuring scientific integrity in the regulatory arena on career scientific staff. As I've explained in some detail in [this article](#), that approach misses the point. The so-called scientific integrity problem has a lot more to do with the relationship between political appointees and the career scientists they oversee than with deliberate falsification by those scientists. If you don't believe that, take a quick look at the Department of Interior Inspector General's reports on the Julie MacDonald affair, [here](#) and [here](#). NOAA's policy, alone among those I've looked at, takes on that relationship.

It includes a “Code of Ethics for Science Supervision and Management” which, among other things, expressly forbids intimidating employees into altering or censoring scientific findings. You wouldn’t think that was necessary, but look again at the MacDonald report. Then ask yourself why the Department of Interior hasn’t put even that minimal limit on managers in [its scientific integrity policy](#).

Of course there’s room for more development of the responsibilities of agency scientists and political appointees than the initial NOAA scientific integrity policy provides. And of course NOAA under Lubchenco hasn’t always been able to fulfill its aspirations of providing transparent disclosure of scientific data and their uncertainties. NOAA apparently [got rolled by the White House](#), for example, in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, and did not publicly object either to low-ball early estimates of the flow from the ruptured well or later to the White House’s assertion that three-quarters of the spilled oil, including oil that had dispersed into the water column, was “gone.” But under Dr. Lubchenco’s direction, NOAA has recognized the policy side of the science/policy problem and has set its aspirations for solving that problem high. That in itself is a substantial accomplishment.

The nation has been lucky to have Dr. Lubchenco’s service as NOAA administrator for the past four years. She will surely continue to serve the nation, as a scientist and an advocate for scientifically-informed policy, from outside the administration. Let’s hope President Obama can find someone as committed and as capable to follow her at NOAA.