

May 5, 2015

Phyllis K. Fong  
Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Room 117FW Jamie Whitten Building  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Inspector General Fong,

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, we would like to express our deep concerns regarding a recent [report](#)<sup>1</sup> that found U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists are being harassed and their work is being censored or suppressed, especially work related to neonicotinoid insecticides and glyphosate, a key ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup Herbicide. We urge you to conduct a thorough investigation into this matter, make the investigation publicly available once it is complete and take necessary steps to ensure that the USDA maintains scientific integrity and does not interfere with the valuable work of its scientists by prohibiting political suppression and alteration, employing clear and enforceable procedures for conducting scientific misconduct, assuring transparency in the administration of policies and adopt strong protections for scientists who file misconduct complaints, participate in misconduct investigations or whose work faces interference.

In March, the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) filed a citizen [petition](#)<sup>2</sup> requesting that the U.S. Department of Agriculture adopt new policies that would further job protection for government scientists who question the health and safety of agricultural chemicals. The petition urges for the agency to adopt policies that would specifically prevent the "political suppression or alteration of studies and lay out clear procedures for investigating allegations and of scientific misconduct."

PEER has found that more than ten USDA scientists have faced consequences or investigations when their work called into question the health and safety of agricultural chemicals. These scientists documented clear actions that violated their scientific integrity, including USDA officials retracting studies, watering down findings, removing scientists' names from authorship and delaying approvals for publication of research papers. According to a recent [article in Reuters](#)<sup>3</sup>, one senior scientist with USDA said he experienced harassment and censorship and told Reuters, "Your words are changed, your papers are censored or edited and you are not allowed to submit them at all."

These reports by PEER and Reuters are extremely troubling. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a responsibility to protect the health and safety of the American public and ensure long-term viability and sustainability of the environment and our natural resources. The possibility that the USDA is prioritizing the interests of the chemical industry over those of the American public is unacceptable. It is imperative that the American people can trust that their government and its employees are serving their constituents and not the profits of private companies. All of the research that the USDA conducts must maintain scientific integrity and transparency to ensure it is guiding sound policy decisions.

Bees, butterflies, birds and other critical pollinators are in great peril and populations are dwindling worldwide. A growing body of scientific evidence has implicated neonicotinoids as a leading driver of bee declines and glyphosate as a leading driver of the destruction of milkweed, the sole food source for monarch butterflies. Recently, the World Health Organization's research arm, the International Agency for Cancer Research (IARC), updated its cancer determination for glyphosate, categorizing it as "probably carcinogenic to humans" (Group 2A) after reviewing scientific research from 17 of the world's top oncology experts from 11 countries.<sup>4</sup>

Other countries, along with states, cities, businesses and universities across the U.S., have passed measures to restrict the use of neonicotinoids to protect pollinators, our agricultural system, the U.S. economy and environment. Yet, the Obama administration has not taken measures to restrict the use of these pesticides, despite mounting evidence and growing public concern around their widespread use. In June 2014, President Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum, which directed federal agencies to create a Pollinator Health Task Force, co-chaired by the USDA and EPA, and develop a federal strategy to protect pollinators.

If the USDA is censoring and suppressing its own scientists who are calling into question the hazards of these dangerous pesticides, how can the USDA be expected to co-chair this task force and develop a meaningful federal strategy that will truly protect bees, birds, monarchs and other critical pollinators and not a strategy that only protects the profits of the pesticide industry?

It is imperative that the USDA maintains scientific integrity and does not allow for harassment, censorship or suppression of findings that counter the interests of industry. We urge you to conduct a thorough investigation into this matter, make its investigation publicly available once it's complete and take the necessary steps to ensure that USDA maintains scientific integrity and never allows industry to interfere with the work of the agency and the interests, health and safety of the American public.

Sincerely,

American Bird Conservancy

Avaaz

Beyond Pesticides

Center for Biological Diversity

Center for Environmental Health

Center for Food Safety

Central Maryland Beekeepers Association

Colorado State Beekeepers Association

Environment New York

Environmental Youth Council of St. Augustine Florida

Farmworker Association of Florida  
Farmworker Justice  
Farmworker Self Help  
Food and Water Watch  
Friends of the Earth  
Georgia Organics  
Global Bees  
Green America  
Island Watch Conservation Science  
Maryland Ornithological Society  
Maryland Pesticide Education Network  
Olympia Beekeepers Association  
Organic Consumers Association  
National Family Farm Coalition  
Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance  
Sierra Club  
The Ecology Center  
Toxic Free North Carolina

cc:

Tom Vilsack, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Krysta Harden, Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Gina McCarthy, EPA Administrator  
Rick Keigwin, EPA Director of Pesticide Re-Evaluation Division

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<sup>1</sup> Gillam, Carey. Environmental group seeks greater protection for USDA scientists. Reuters. 27 March 2015.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/usda-petition-idUSL2N0WT1TQ20150327>

<sup>2</sup> Ruch, Jeff. Petition for Rulemaking United States Department of Agriculture. 26 March 2015.

[http://www.peer.org/assets/docs/usda/3\\_26\\_15\\_USDA\\_%20Rule-Making\\_Petition.pdf](http://www.peer.org/assets/docs/usda/3_26_15_USDA_%20Rule-Making_Petition.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Gillam, Carey. Environmental group seeks greater protection for USDA scientists. Reuters. 27 March 2015.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/usda-petition-idUSL2N0WT1TQ20150327>

<sup>4</sup> Guyton, K.Z., et al. on behalf of IARC, 2015. Carcinogenicity of Tetrachlorvinphos, Parathion, Malathion, Diazinon, and Glyphosate. *The Lancet Oncology*. doi: 10.1016/S147-2045(15)70134-8.