



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

June 20, 2023

TO: Arati Prabhakar
Director
White House Office of Science and Technology Policy
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20504

Alondra Nelson
Deputy Director for Science and Society
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Diana Shaw
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Department of State
Office of Inspector General
1700 North Moore Street (SA-39)
Arlington, VA 22209

Re: Request for Investigation into Apparent Scientific Integrity Violation by Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry

Dear Dr. Prabhakar and Ms. Shaw,

Maintaining the confidence of the American people is crucial for government to function well, particularly in light of the recent unprecedented shocks of the global pandemic. When the public loses trust in public officials and their scientific claims, citizens can end up ignoring or disregarding even the most logical, scientifically grounded, evidence-based directives. The consequences of a substantial loss of trust can be tragic. Protect the Public's Trust (PPT) is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to promoting ethics in government and restoring the public's trust in government officials.

Regrettably, we must bring to your attention that U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry appears to have disregarded, and arguably dramatically misrepresented, scientific evidence in a recent speech on climate issues in agriculture.

In his speech, Mr. Kerry claimed that greenhouse gas emissions currently kill 15 million people *every year*. This claim is both tremendously consequential and entirely unsupported by scientific evidence.



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

Accordingly, we request an immediate investigation into whether Mr. Kerry's claim violates the Biden Administration's scientific integrity policies and what the appropriate remedial action should be to adequately correct the public record and deter similar hysterical claims in the future.

I. John Kerry's Remarks to the AIM for Climate Summit on May 10

On May 10, 2023, Mr. Kerry addressed a summit hosted by the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate in his role as Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. During his remarks, Mr. Kerry stressed the urgency of reaching net-zero emissions in the agricultural sector and of treating climate issues as a crisis. To support these policy positions, Mr. Kerry made this dramatic claim: "15 million people are dying every single year around this planet as a consequence of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere, in the air which travels around and drops in the form of pollution and is warming the ocean at record rates, changing the chemistry of the ocean itself."¹

II. The Scientific Integrity Rules

President Biden's Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking

President Biden has been clear that it is the position of his administration that official policy and communications uphold the strictest standards of scientific integrity. In issuing the Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking (the "Memorandum"), President Biden has established strict guidelines mandating that agencies and officials within his administration act based on the highest quality science.² The Memorandum requires "the highest level of integrity in all aspects of executive branch involvement with scientific and technological processes" and that "[s]cientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations." To wit:

It is the policy of [the Biden] Administration to make evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data. Scientific and technological information, data, and evidence are central to the development and iterative improvement of sound policies, and to the delivery of equitable programs, across every area of government. Scientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations. When scientific or technological information is considered in policy decisions, it should be subjected to well-

¹ *AIM for Climate Summit – May 10, We Don't Have Time*, at 32:00 (May 11, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF8opPN16LQ&t=1225s&ab_channel=WeDon%27tHaveTime

² Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking, 86 Fed. Reg. 88845 (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-02-10/pdf/2021-02839.pdf>.



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

established scientific processes, including peer review where feasible and appropriate, with appropriate protections for privacy.³

Pursuant to President Biden's commitment to scientific integrity, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) developed policies for ensuring executive agencies and officials uphold strict scientific integrity standards. In January 2023, OSTP released A Framework for Federal Scientific Integrity Policy and Practice (the "Framework").⁴ The Framework establishes a consolidated federal definition of scientific integrity:⁵

Scientific integrity is the adherence to professional practices, ethical behavior, and the principles of honesty and objectivity when conducting, managing, using the results of, and communicating about science and scientific activities. Inclusivity, transparency, and protection from inappropriate influence are hallmarks of scientific integrity.

A "critical policy feature" of the Framework's approach to building a culture of scientific integrity in the Executive Branch is promoting the transparent and free flow of scientific information, particularly by ensuring the scientific accuracy of communications to the public.⁶

Department of State Scientific Integrity Policy

In addition to the Memorandum and the Framework, the State Department maintains its own scientific integrity policies. Under its policies, scientific integrity is compromised by "[a]ltering, or misrepresenting scientific or technological findings in public communications."⁷ Under 11 FAM 824.2, the Department's scientific integrity policy applies to political appointees of the department who "communicate science and technology policy or scientific topics," "manage or support portfolios that include environment," and "facilitate scientific cooperation between government, academic, private institutions or nongovernmental or civil society organizations."⁸ Under 11 FAM 825.3, when public diplomacy or public affairs activities incorporate environmental topics "their content should be representative of well-established scientific processes, and when possible and appropriate, utilize peer-reviewed material."⁹

³ *Id.*

⁴ *A Framework for Federal Scientific Integrity Policy and Practice*, Scientific Integrity Framework Interagency Working Group of the National Science and Technology Council (January 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/01-2023-Framework-for-Federal-Scientific-Integrity-Policy-and-Practice.pdf>.

⁵ *Id.* at 8.

⁶ *Id.* at 10, 14, 20, 22, 25, 45.

⁷ 11 FAM 823(3).

⁸ 11 FAM 824.2.

⁹ 11 FAM 825.3.



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

III. Analysis

Mr. Kerry appears to have violated his obligation to maintain scientific integrity in his public communications on environmental and scientific topics by claiming that 15 million people die every year from greenhouse gases.

Under these regulations and guidelines provided by the Memorandum, the Framework, and the State Department's Foreign Affairs Manual, there is a clear mandate for Executive Branch officials to communicate scientific information to the public accurately based on the best available scientific evidence. This includes political appointees like Mr. Kerry. Failure to do so is a direct breach of the Biden Administration's strict scientific integrity policies.

Mr. Kerry's figure of 15 million people killed by greenhouse gases yearly has no apparent scientific basis. Research and predictions on deaths caused by climate change do not reflect Kerry's estimate. Even the most generous and far-reaching journey through academic literature leaves one empty-handed. For instance, there is scientific literature predicting the potential deaths of 15 million people due to climate-related glacial-lake outburst floods, but that is only a *prediction* of a one-time event that may happen years from now, not an annualized death toll that is *currently occurring*.¹⁰ Regarding the notion that climate change kills millions of people yearly, there is no research supporting this suggestion. The direst current predictions appear to estimate 3.4 million death per year *by the end of the century*.¹¹ Not only is this figure approximately one-fifth of Mr. Kerry's claim, it is also a prediction of what may occur 80 years from now, not a statement of current fact.

The sheer audacity of the statement, repeated twice in Mr. Kerry's speech, is shocking both on its face and in its comparison to well-established causes of death. The World Health Organization states that "the world's biggest killer is ischaemic heart disease, responsible for 16% of the world's total deaths...[increasing to] 8.9 million deaths in 2019." After "stroke" at roughly 6 million deaths, the next several highest causes of death drop off precipitously.

There is simply no scientific basis for Mr. Kerry's outlandish claim that 15 million people currently die each year from greenhouse gases.

IV. Conclusion

Despite the enormity of Mr. Kerry's claim, he did not cite any scientific evidence for its basis. Nor is there any apparent scientific research that supports a claim that there are currently 15 million people dying yearly due to greenhouse gas emissions – or any other single cause of death that is tracked. Such a blatant misstatement of scientific information to the public is, by its nature,

¹⁰ Caroline Taylor, et al., *Glacial lake outburst floods threaten millions globally*, 14 *Nature Communications* 487 (2023), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-023-36033-x>.

¹¹ *New Health Data Shows Unabated Climate Change Will Cause 3.4 Million Deaths Per Year by Century End*, V20 Finance Ministers (Nov. 12, 2022), <https://www.v-20.org/new-health-data-shows-unabated-climate-change-will-cause-3.4-million-deaths-per-year-by-century-end>.



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

a threat to public trust and good governance. It is made far worse when such misinformation is used to publicly support sweeping policy changes like trying to reach net-zero emissions in agriculture, which would have untold effects upon the economy and lives of the American people writ large.

There are few greater breaches of scientific integrity than for public officials to convey inaccurate scientific information to the public knowingly or recklessly, especially when it is done to justify politically motivated decisions or agendas. Such conduct inevitably erodes the public's trust in its scientific and governing institutions. Furthermore, it harms the nation incalculably by reducing science from a great, dispassionate tool of public policy that transcends party lines to yet another political football. Simply put, hysteria has no place in our government officials' speeches.

Therefore, we call on you to immediately open an investigation into whether Mr. Kerry violated pertinent scientific integrity policy and what remedial actions are recommended to correct the record for the public and for any other public officials who may unwittingly rely on such factually inaccurate information to support their decision-making.

Sincerely,

Michael Chamberlain
Director
Protect the Public's Trust