


Julie Kay Roberts



May 15, 2020

Ms. Cynthia J. Decker, Ph.D.
NOAA Scientific Integrity Officer
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Silver Spring MD 20910

Dear Dr. Decker,

I am writing in response to the report drafted by the National Academy of Public Administration regarding the alleged violations of the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy. After careful review of the draft report, I have identified several items to which I object and would like either to qualify or refute. To begin, the overall report does not accurately capture the situation between August 28 – September 6, 2019. As a certified emergency manager with years of experience responding to disasters, it is not uncommon to work longer-than-normal days to support a response. For more than a week, the forecast projected Hurricane Dorian would make landfall along the East Coast of the United States, expecting to cause catastrophic damage. As I explained in both of my interviews between August 28 and September 6, 2019, I personally worked between 130-150 hours supporting the activation for Hurricane Dorian. I am not complaining about the hours worked since that is the standard expectation for emergency managers during a large event, but the stress and lack of sleep leading up to the morning of September 6, 2019 certainly influenced the events that led to the release of the statement in question.

The NAPA Panel states on the first page of the Executive Summary that the allegations are not a perfect fit for the existing NOAA Scientific Integrity or Department of Commerce policies. Throughout the document, the panel states that the current NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy does not outline a criterion to determine if a loss of integrity occurs, therefore, it is illogical for the panel to determine that I violated a policy that did not exist at the time of the alleged infraction. Essentially, the panel “created” a process in an attempt to retrofit the allegations. Clearly, this is problematic.

In addition, the panel recognizes that outside forces were a factor in the statement that was issued on September 6 but is ultimately unable to hold responsible those involved in drafting said statement because they are outside the purview of the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy. Although frustration with this situation is completely understandable, in no way should an employee of NOAA, such as myself, be held culpable for a statement in which I had no part in creating and was, in fact, produced by others outside of the agency.

I also have major concerns with the Executive Summary and omission of key information that is provided later in the detailed description of the allegations. By neglecting that information in the Executive Summary, the panel fails to provide the complete picture of what occurred and the contextual factors that played a role in the statement issued on September 6, 2019. Throughout the

Executive Summary, and complete report, the timeline related to the drafting of the September 6, 2019 statement is not clearly stated. As the document currently reads, it could appear the statement was drafted over multiple days between the tweet on September 1, 2019 and the issuing of the statement on September 6, 2019. The statement in question was, in fact, discussed and drafted in less than four hours.

More specifically, I agree with the findings for Allegation One related to media guidance issued between September 1, 2019 and September 6, 2019, which states no violation of the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy is found. I also concur with the recommendation to establish a process to provide guidance to NOAA employees regarding media interaction for a situation that is out of the normal day-to-day operations. It is very rare that a situation occurs where this guidance is required but could be in situations such as a mass stranding for fisheries, a catastrophic accident, or large-scale weather events where scientists and meteorologists need to focus on their work and not fielding media inquiries.

I do not agree with the findings of the panel for Allegation Two, which states that Dr. Neil Jacobs and I knowingly and willingly violated the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy when we did not allow the Birmingham WFO to review the September 6, 2019 statement prior to being issued. On page 46 of the report it clearly states that the drafting of the statement was directed by officials not covered by the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy and that NOAA employees in the room raised concern over the language in the statement. The report also states that I expressed in the interviews that additional reviews by NOAA officials would have done little to change the outcome of the statement. The panel outlines in the recommendations that there is currently no process in place to guide such a scenario, therefore, how could there be a violation of a non-existent policy.

I do not agree with the findings of the panel for Allegation Three, which states that Dr. Neil Jacobs and I knowingly and willingly violated the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy. As stated in the report, the drafting of the September 6, 2019 statement was largely directed by officials not covered by the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy. As stated in the report on pages 50 and 51, both Dr. Jacobs and I, along with other NOAA officials, proposed removal of the statement regarding the Birmingham WFO, only to be told that portion would need to remain. As outlined in the report, the objections were overruled by officials, therefore, the panel should not find that Dr. Jacobs and I willfully and knowingly violated the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy regarding Allegation Three.

To summarize, the NAPA Panel states at the beginning of the report that the allegations do not fit the process outlined in the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy and, therefore, it had to find a way to make it fit. The recommendations outlined by the panel to improve the policy will in turn strengthen the process and reduce the likelihood of these situations from occurring in the future. The Executive Summary is weak, leaving out key information regarding the contextual factors that played a role in the development of the September 6, 2019 statement. The panel did not provide documentation to support finding that Dr. Jacobs and I knowingly and willfully violated the NOAA Scientific Integrity Policy for Allegation Two and Three.

I stated in my interviews with the NAPA panel that I recognize the actions taken on September 6, 2019 impacted the Agency and NOAA employees. The last eight months have been one of the most difficult times for me both personally and professionally. I was committed to promoting the mission of NOAA and telling the stories of the work that NOAA employees do daily. I could have chosen to resign on September 6, 2019 or refused to issue the statement, but in the end, I knew it would be issued and I did not want to put my staff in that position. I recognize the damage done that day will require time to heal. My support for the agency has not decreased over the last eight months. If anything, I have continued to my part to promote the positive work and support the agency where possible. I committed during my interview, and to my staff at the time, to do my best to ensure this did not happen in the future.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie Kay Roberts". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "R".

Julie Kay Roberts