

NASA Principles and Policies on Scientific Openness

In February, I released an agency-wide message expressing my views on the issue of scientific openness and the role of public affairs within the agency. In that message I emphasized NASA's commitment to open scientific and technical inquiry and dialogue with the public. The message also stated that we would institute an effort to revise existing public affairs policies to correct any deficiencies, and to make sure they are fair, reasonable and easily understood. I am writing to you today to report on the results of this work.

I wish to thank the members of the working group who helped develop the set of principles and policies that will govern how we work with the news media to inform the public about our mission and research activities. This policy group, comprised of representatives from science, engineering, law, public affairs and management, did an exemplary job of addressing a broad range of issues in an effort to achieve our goal of openness in scientific and technical communications, while at the same time respecting the need to coordinate agency communications properly.

The resulting new policy, which will be available today on our Web site at <http://www.nasa.gov/commpolicy>, contains a statement of principles and revised policies that will enable better cooperation across our agency and more effective communication with the public. These principles are:

- A commitment to a culture of scientific and technical openness which values the free exchange of ideas, data and information. Scientific and technical information concerning agency programs and projects will be accurate and unfiltered.
- Consistent with NASA's statutory responsibility, providing for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination of information concerning NASA activities and their results.
- To ensure timely release of information, NASA will endeavor to ensure cooperation and coordination among the agency's scientific, engineering and public affairs communities.
- In keeping with the desire for a culture of openness, NASA employees may, consistent with this policy, speak to the press and the public about their work.

The policy provides several important provisions in support of the principles outlined above that I feel are worth further comment. First, it lays out clear guidelines for working with public affairs and unambiguously states what public affairs officers can and cannot do. Second, it guarantees that NASA scientists may communicate their conclusions to the media, but requires that they draw a distinction between professional conclusions and personal views that may go

beyond the scope of their specific technical work, or beyond the purview of the agency. Third, it sets forth a dispute resolution process to ensure that all parties have a route of appeal in communicating scientific and technical information. Lastly, it establishes clear areas of responsibility and methods of coordination which are intended to clarify and improve the communications process.

The principles and provisions of this revised policy will inform and guide NASA's public interactions. Realistically, not every scientific inquiry or engineering development will be deemed worthy of a press release, despite the sometimes strong opinions of the scientists or engineers involved in the work. Decisions concerning the newsworthiness of the numerous activities within NASA must be made and carried out in a coordinated fashion, but with views from all parties considered. This revised policy is an important step in that direction.

It is worth recalling that in the infancy of the space program, a difficult but very wise decision was made to allow live television coverage of our first Mercury launch, even though this left open the possibility of an embarrassing, even fatal, failure being broadcast to the world. On that day, the world watched with us as Alan Shepard was successfully launched on his, and our nation's first flight into space. NASA has remained true to this policy of open communication of both successes and failures ever since. We remain fully committed to that same standard today.

Michael Griffin
NASA Administrator

NASA POLICY ON THE RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO NEWS AND INFORMATION MEDIA

Scope.

This directive sets forth policy governing the release of public information, which is defined as information in any form provided to news and information media, especially information that has the potential to generate significant media, or public interest or inquiry. Examples include, but are not limited to, press releases, media advisories, news features, and web postings. Not included under this definition are scientific and technical reports, web postings designed for technical or scientific interchange, and technical information presented at professional meetings or in professional journals.

Applicability.

(a) This policy applies to NASA Headquarters, NASA Centers, and Component Facilities.

(b) In the event of any conflict between this policy and any other NASA policy, directive, or regulation, this policy shall govern and supersede any previous issuance or directive.

Principles.

(a) NASA, a scientific and technical agency, is committed to a culture of openness with the media and public that values the free exchange of ideas, data, and information as part of scientific and technical inquiry. Scientific and technical information from or about Agency programs and projects will be accurate and unfiltered.

(b) Consistent with NASA statutory responsibility, NASA will “provide for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination of information concerning its activities and the results thereof.” Release of public information concerning NASA activities and the results of NASA activities will be made promptly, factually, and completely.

(c) To ensure timely release of information, NASA will endeavor to ensure cooperation and coordination among the Agency’s scientific, engineering, and public affairs communities.

(d) In keeping with the desire for a culture of openness, NASA employees may, consistent with this policy, speak to the press and the public about their work.

(e) This policy does not authorize or require disclosure of information that is exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. § 552) or

otherwise restricted by statute, regulation, Executive Order, or other Executive Branch policy or NASA policy (e.g., OMB Circulars, NASA Policy Directives). Examples of information not releasable under this policy include, without limitation, information that is, or is marked as, classified information, procurement sensitive information, information subject to the Privacy Act, other sensitive but unclassified information, and information subject to privilege, such as pre-decisional information or attorney-client communications.

Responsibilities.

(a) The Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs is responsible for developing and administering an integrated Agency-wide communications program, establishing Agency public affairs policies and priorities, and coordinating and reviewing the performance of all Agency public affairs activities. The Assistant Administrator will develop criteria to identify which news releases and other types of public information will be issued nationwide by NASA Headquarters. Decisions to release public information nationwide by NASA Headquarters will be made by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs or his/her designee.

(b) NASA's Mission Directorate Associate Administrators and Mission Support Office heads have ultimate responsibility for the technical, scientific, and programmatic accuracy of all information that is related to their respective programs and released by NASA.

(c) Under the direction of the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs, public affairs officers assigned to Mission Directorates are responsible for the timely and efficient coordination of public information covering their respective programs. This coordination includes review by appropriate Mission Directorate officials. It also includes editing by public affairs staff to ensure that public information products are well written and appropriate for the intended audience. However, such editing shall not change scientific or technical data, or the meaning of programmatic content.

(d) Center Public Affairs Directors are responsible for implementing their portion of the Agency's communications program, adhering to Agency policies, procedures, and priorities, and coordinating their activities with Headquarters (and others where appropriate). They are responsible for the quality of public information prepared by Center public affairs officers. They also are responsible for the day-to-day production of public information covering their respective Center activities, which includes obtaining the necessary Center concurrences and coordinating, as necessary, with the appropriate Headquarters public affairs officers.

(e) Center Directors have ultimate responsibility for the accuracy of public information that does not require the concurrence of Headquarters. (See "Public information coordination and concurrence," section (d).)

(f) All NASA employees are required to coordinate, in a timely manner, with the appropriate public affairs officers prior to releasing information that has the potential to generate significant media, or public interest or inquiry.

(g) All NASA public affairs officers are required to notify the appropriate Headquarters public affairs officers in a timely manner about activities or events that have the potential to generate significant media or public interest or inquiry.

(h) All NASA public affairs employees are expected to adhere to the following code of conduct:

(1) Be honest and accurate in all communications.

(2) Honor publication embargoes.

(3) Respond promptly to media requests and respect media deadlines.

(4) Act promptly to correct mistakes or erroneous information, either internally or externally.

(5) Promote the free flow of scientific and technical information.

(6) Protect non-public information.

(i) All NASA employees are responsible for adhering to plans (including schedules) for activities established by public affairs offices and senior management for the coordinated release of public information.

(j) All NASA-funded missions will have a public affairs plan, approved by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs, which will be managed by Headquarters and/or a designated NASA Center.

(k) Public affairs activities for NASA-funded missions will not be managed by non-NASA institutions, unless authorized by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs.

(l) The requirements of this directive do not apply to the Office of Inspector General regarding its activities.

Public information coordination and concurrence.

(a) *General.* All NASA employees involved in preparing and issuing NASA public information are responsible for proper coordination among Headquarters, Center, and Mission Directorate offices to include review and clearance by appropriate officials prior to issuance. Such coordination will be accomplished through

procedures developed and published by the NASA Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs.

(b) *Coordination.* To ensure timely release of public information, Headquarters and Center public affairs officers are required to coordinate to obtain review and clearance by appropriate officials, keep each other informed of changes, delays, or cancellation of releases, and provide advance notification of the actual release.

(c) All public information shall be coordinated through the appropriate Headquarters offices, including review by the appropriate Mission Directorate Associate Administrator and mission support office head, or their designees, to ensure scientific, technical, and programmatic accuracy, and review by the Assistant Administrator of Public Affairs or his/her designee to ensure that public information products are well written and appropriate for the intended audience.

(d) Centers may, however, without the full coordination of Headquarters, issue public information that is institutional in nature, of local interest, or has been deemed not to be a Headquarters release. (The Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs or his/her designee will determine which public information will be issued nationwide by NASA Headquarters.) These releases must be coordinated through the appropriate Center offices and approved by the Center Director and Center Public Affairs Director. The Center Public Affairs Director is required to provide proper notification to the NASA Office of Public Affairs, Headquarters, prior to release. (The Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs shall publish guidelines for the release of public information that may be issued by Centers without clearance from Headquarters' offices.)

(e) *Dispute Resolution.* Any dispute arising from a decision to proceed or not proceed with the issuance of a news release or other type of public information will be addressed and resolved by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs with the appropriate Mission Directorate Associate Administrator, mission support office head, Center Director, and others, such as Center Public Affairs Directors, as necessary. However, the appropriate Mission Directorate Associate Administrator shall be the arbiter of disputes about the accuracy or characterization of programmatic, technical, or scientific information. Additional appeals may be made to the Chief of Strategic Communications and to the Office of the Administrator. When requested by a Center Public Affairs Director, an explanation of the resolution will be provided in writing to all interested Agency parties.

Interviews.

(a) Only spokespersons designated by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs, or his/her designee, are authorized to speak for the Agency in an official capacity regarding NASA policy, programmatic, and budget issues.

(b) In response to media interview requests, NASA will offer articulate and knowledgeable spokespersons who can best serve the needs of the media and the American public. However, journalists may have access to the NASA officials they seek to interview, provided those NASA officials agree to be interviewed.

(c) NASA employees may speak to the media and the public about their work. When doing so, employees shall notify their immediate supervisor and coordinate with their public affairs office in advance of interviews whenever possible, or immediately thereafter, and are encouraged, to the maximum extent practicable, to have a public affairs officer present during interviews. If public affairs officers are present, their role will be to attest to the content of the interview, support the interviewee, and provide post-interview follow up with the media as necessary.

(d) NASA, as an Agency, does not take a position on any scientific conclusions. That is the role of the broad scientific community and the nature of the scientific process. NASA scientists may draw conclusions and may, consistent with this policy, communicate those conclusions to the media. However, NASA employees who present personal views outside their official area of expertise or responsibility must make clear that they are presenting their individual views – not the views of the Agency – and ask that they be sourced as such.

(e) Appropriated funds may only be used to support Agency missions and objectives consistent with legislative or presidential direction. Government funds shall not be used for media interviews or other communication activities that go beyond the scope of Agency responsibilities and/or an employee's official area of expertise or responsibility.

(f) Media interviews will be “on-the-record” and attributable to the person making the remarks, unless authorized to do otherwise by the Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs or Center Public Affairs Director, or their designees. Any NASA employee providing material to the press will identify himself/herself as the source.

(g) Audio recordings may be made by NASA with consent of the interviewee.

(h) NASA employees are not required to speak to the media.

(i) Public information volunteered by a NASA official will not be considered exclusive to any one media source and will be made available to other sources, if requested.

Preventing release of classified information to the media.

(a) Release of classified information in any form (e.g., documents, through interviews, audio/visual, etc.) to the news media is prohibited. The disclosure of classified information to unauthorized individuals may be cause for prosecution

and/or disciplinary action against the NASA employee involved. Ignorance of NASA policy and procedures regarding classified information does not release a NASA employee from responsibility for preventing any unauthorized release. See NPR 1600.1, Chapter 5, Section 5.23 for internal NASA guidance on management of classified information. For further guidance that applies to all agencies, see Executive Order 12958, as amended, "Classified National Security Information" and its implementing directive at 32 CFR Parts 2001 and 2004.

(b) Any attempt by news media representatives to obtain classified information will be reported through the Headquarters Office of Public Affairs or Installation Public Affairs Office to the Installation Security Office and Office of Security and Program Protection.

(c) For classified operations and/or programs managed under the auspices of a DD Form 254, "*Contract Security Classification Specification*," all inquiries concerning this activity will be responded to by the appropriate PAO official designated in Item 12 on the DD Form 254.

(d) For classified operations and/or information owned by other Government agencies (e.g., DOD, DOE, etc.), all inquiries will be referred to the appropriate Agency public affairs officer as established in written agreements.

Preventing unauthorized release of sensitive but unclassified (SBU) information/material to the news media

(a) All NASA SBU information requires accountability and approval for release. Release of SBU information to unauthorized personnel is prohibited. Unauthorized release of SBU information may result in prosecution and/or disciplinary action. Ignorance of NASA policy and procedures regarding SBU information does not release a NASA employee from responsibility for unauthorized release. See NPR 1600.1, Chapter 5, Section 5.24 for guidance on identification, marking, accountability and release of NASA SBU information.

(b) Examples of SBU information include: proprietary information of others provided to NASA under nondisclosure or confidentiality agreement; source selection and bid and proposal information; information subject to export control under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) or the Export Administration Regulations (EAR); information subject to the Privacy Act of 1974; predecisional materials such as national space policy not yet publicly released; pending reorganization plans or sensitive travel itineraries; and information that could constitute an indicator of U.S. government intentions, capabilities, operations, or activities or otherwise threaten operations security.

(c) Upon request for access to information/material deemed SBU, coordination must be made with the information/material owner to determine if the information/material may be released. Other organizations that play a part in SBU information identification, accountability and release (e.g., General Counsel, External Relations, Procurement, etc.) must be consulted for assistance and/or concurrence prior to release.

(d) Requests for SBU information from other Government agencies must be referred to the respective Agency public affairs officer.

Multimedia materials.

(a) NASA's multimedia material, from all sources, will be made available to the information media, the public, and to all Agency Centers and contractor installations utilizing contemporary delivery methods and emerging digital technology.

(b) Centers will provide the media, the public, and as necessary, NASA Headquarters with:

- (1) Selected prints and original or duplicate files of news-oriented imagery and other digital multimedia material generated within their respective areas.
- (2) Selected video material in the highest quality format practical, which, in the opinion of the installations, would be appropriate for use as news feed material or features in pre-produced programs and other presentations.
- (3) Audio and/or video files of significant news developments and other events of historic or public interest.
- (4) Interactive multimedia features that can be incorporated into the Agency's Internet portal for use by internal and external audiences, including the media and the general public.

News releases concerning international activities.

(a) Releases of information involving NASA activities, views, programs, or projects involving another country or an international organization require prior coordination and approval by the Headquarters offices of External Relations and Public Affairs.

(b) NASA Centers and Headquarters offices will report all visits proposed by representatives of foreign news media to the public affairs officer for the Office of

External Relations for appropriate handling consistent with all NASA policies and procedures.

NASA Public Affairs Policy FAQ

Q. How is this policy different than the public affairs policy NASA had before?

A. In the course of reviewing policy governing the treatment of scientific and technical information in communicating with the public, we found that some of the policies governing interaction between NASA scientists, engineers and public affairs officers required clarification to be both useful and practical to implement. We also found a lack of clear policy guidance regarding the treatment of scientific and technical information at NASA.

The resulting new policy, which will be available today on our website, contains a statement of principles and revised policies that will enable better cooperation across our agency and more effective communication with the public. These principles are:

- A commitment to a culture of scientific and technical openness which values the free exchange of ideas, data and information. Scientific and technical information concerning agency programs and projects will be accurate and unfiltered.
- Consistent with NASA's statutory responsibility, providing for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination of information concerning NASA activities and their results.
- To ensure timely release of information, NASA will endeavor to ensure cooperation and coordination among the agency's scientific, engineering and public affairs communities.
- In keeping with the desire for a culture of openness, NASA employees may, consistent with this policy, speak to the press and the public about their work.

The policy provides several important provisions in support of the principles outlined above that I feel are worth further comment. First, it lays out clear guidelines for working with public affairs and unambiguously states what public affairs officers can and cannot do. Second, it guarantees that NASA scientists may communicate their conclusions to the media, but requires that they draw a distinction between professional conclusions and personal views that may go beyond the scope of their specific technical work, or beyond the purview of the agency. Third, it sets forth a dispute resolution process to ensure that all parties have a route of appeal in communicating scientific and technical information. Lastly, it establishes clear areas of responsibility and methods of coordination which are intended to clarify and improve the communications process.

Q. Who has authority over all NASA news and information released to the public?

A. The Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs is responsible for the release of all public information. All decisions related to the release of public information will be made by him/her and/or their designee. However, the Mission Directorate Associate Administrator and Mission Support office heads have ultimate responsibility for the

technical, scientific, and programmatic accuracy of all information that is related to their respective programs and released by NASA.

Q. What if headquarters public affairs will not release information that a scientist or Center deems scientifically valid and newsworthy?

A. There is a dispute resolution process in place that allows for any grievance to be heard by the Assistant Administrator of Public Affairs who is required to consult with the head of the appropriate scientific or technical organization such as the Center Director or Mission Directorate Associate Administrator. The Mission Directorate Associate Administrator will resolve any disputes concerning scientific, technical or programmatic information. If necessary, additional appeals may be made to the Chief of Strategic Communications and the Office of the Administrator.

Q. What do you mean by public information?

A. The policy defines public information as information in any form provided to news and information media, especially information that has the potential to generate significant media, or public interest or inquiry. Examples include press releases, media advisories, news features, and web postings. Not included under this definition are scientific and technical reports, web postings designed for technical or scientific interchange, and technical information presented at professional meetings or in professional journals.

Q. So would this policy apply to research published in Science, Nature or some other professional publication?

A. If the material is peer-reviewed scientific or technical information or research then it is not subject to this policy.

Q. What about information posted to the Web?

A. The same policy applies to the Web as to standard release of public information. All public information posted on a NASA Web site is subject to this policy. However, scientific and technical reports, scientific data and technical information for professional interchange and peer-reviewed research are not included.

Q: Does every press release need to be approved by NASA HQ public affairs?

A. All public information, including press releases, intended for *nationwide* release must be reviewed and cleared by the NASA headquarters public affairs office. However, NASA Centers may release public information that is institutional in nature, of local interest or deemed by NASA Headquarters not to be a headquarters release without review and clearance. All NASA Centers are required to provide proper notification to NASA headquarters public affairs prior to release.

Q. Can public affairs edit or alter scientific information?

A. Never. Public affairs can edit a press release to ensure proper grammar, readability and that it is appropriate for the intended audience, but may not edit or alter scientific or technical information. If in the course of editing any changes are made to scientific and technical content, the release is sent back to the appropriate office for review to ensure scientific and technical accuracy.

Q. If a media request comes in to speak with a specific NASA scientist or engineer; can public affairs suggest a different person to respond to that inquiry?

A. Yes. Public affairs may suggest to the reporter that another NASA employee may be more suitable to respond to that issue, but the reporter will always have access to the specific official they seek to interview, provided that the official agrees to the interview.

Q. Does this mean all NASA employees can speak to the press?

A. All NASA employees may speak to the media and the public about their work. Only a designated NASA spokesperson may speak to the media on budget, policy or programmatic issues. In responding to media requests for an interview, all NASA employees should notify their supervisor and the public affairs office whenever possible prior to the interview. If an employee is unable to provide prior notification, he/she should do so immediately after the interview. It is strongly encouraged, but not required, that a public affairs officer be present during media interviews to attest to the content of what was said, provide support to the interviewee, and post-interview follow up.

Q. When issues of official NASA policy or budget are discussed, or other matters beyond the scope of the interviewee's duties, may the person being interviewed provide their opinions even though they may not be the official agency spokesperson on the matter?

A. Yes. However, they must clearly state that this is their personal opinion and does not reflect the views of the agency.

Q. How does NASA differentiate science and technical conclusions from policy?

A. NASA, as a science and technical agency, does not take a position on any scientific conclusions. That is determined by the broad scientific community and the nature of the scientific process. For example, NASA does not have a position on the existence of black holes, but accepts their existence based on the weight of scientific evidence. By contrast, NASA does take a position on certain policy questions, such as the NASA budget, and retains the right to designate which individuals may relay this position to the public.

Q. So what are scientists allowed to discuss or not discuss with the media?

A. NASA scientists may draw conclusions based on their research and may talk about their conclusions with the media. However, if speaking on issues that go beyond their official area of expertise or beyond the scope and mission of the agency, then they are required to make clear they are presenting their personal views and not the views of the agency.

Q. What does it mean that a NASA employee cannot express his/her personal views while using government resources?

A. NASA employees can express their personal views as long as they state that it is their own view and not the view of the agency. The policy states that “government funds shall not be used for media interviews or other communication activities that go beyond the scope of Agency responsibilities and/or an employee’s official area of expertise or responsibility.” In other words, if an employee wishes to participate in activities, the principal purpose of which is to discuss matters with the public or media that are not part of the employee’s official duties, government resources shall not be used toward that activity.

Q. Why is it that “designated NASA officials” are only allowed to speak about NASA policy, budgets and programmatic issues?

A. As a matter of conducting business in a professional manner, it is essential that the agency have designated officials to respond to media questions regarding NASA policies, budgets and programs in a cohesive and consistent way that accurately reflects NASA leadership’s position on these issues.

Q. Why is there a need for a NASA employee to notify their public affairs office if they are free to express their personal opinions?

A. NASA employees are not required to notify public affairs to express their opinions. If they participate in media activities related to their professional responsibilities, they are asked to notify and coordinate with public affairs. Within that professional context, employees may express their personal views as long as they make clear that they are their personal views and not the views of the agency.

Q. Is the new policy more restrictive than the current one? It lists many more types of information that are not releasable, such as budget information, sensitive but unclassified information, and pre-decisional information.

A. No. The new policy does not establish any new restrictions on the release of information. Like the current policy, it does not authorize or restrict the release of information, rather it covers the process by which information is released. The difference is that the new policy gives examples. Specifically, where the current policy simply states that it does not authorize release of information exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, the new policy gives examples of such information, with references to the authority covering the specific information where appropriate. Those

examples are not exhaustive, nor do they represent new restrictions—they are simply an aid to identifying information that is outside the scope of the policy.

Q. Is this policy final?

A. No. This is the product of the Policy Review Team that was assembled by the NASA Administrator. It is currently being reviewed by the unions. NASA will take their comments into consideration and respond accordingly.

Q. Is this a new policy?

A. No. It is a revision of the existing NASA policy that has been in the Code of Federal Regulations in one form or another since at least 1976.

Q. When will the new procedures implementing this policy be completed?

A. The Review Team will also oversee development of this document. A draft is currently under development. We hope to have the procedures available in the near future. Simultaneously, we are working with the unions to obtain comments on the policy itself and respond to those comments. Once that process is complete, we can move toward completing the procedures document.