

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 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.