



Highlights of [GAO-07-653](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Researchers at federal agencies disseminate their research results through a variety of approaches, including scientific publications, presentations, press releases, and media interviews. Because of recent concerns about some federal researchers possibly being restricted from disseminating their research on controversial topics, GAO determined (1) the policies that guide the dissemination of federal research at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); (2) how effectively these agencies have communicated their policies to researchers; and (3) the extent to which researchers have been restricted in disseminating their research. GAO conducted a survey of 1,811 researchers randomly selected at the three agencies, and had a 66 percent response rate.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to the Department of Commerce, NASA, NIST, and NOAA to clarify their dissemination policies for press releases and media interviews, ensure researchers have a policy for appealing dissemination decisions, and provide training on these policies. In commenting on a draft of this report, Commerce, responding for NIST, NOAA, and itself, generally concurred with GAO's findings and recommendations, as did NASA.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-653.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Ms. Anu Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

FEDERAL RESEARCH

Policies Guiding the Dissemination of Scientific Research from Selected Agencies Should Be Clarified and Better Communicated

What GAO Found

Most of the NASA, NIST, and NOAA policies that guide the dissemination of federally funded research generally facilitate the dissemination process, but some do not. GAO found that overall NASA's policies, including its recently revised media policy, are clear and should help facilitate dissemination regardless of the dissemination approach used. At NIST and NOAA, GAO found that the agencies' policies for dissemination through publications and presentations were generally clear and should facilitate dissemination; but their policies for disseminating research through media interviews and press releases may hinder it. For example, because both NIST and NOAA are part of Commerce, researchers at these agencies must comply with department-level policies to disseminate their research results through media interviews or press releases, but Commerce's policies are outdated and can prevent researchers from meeting media schedules. Moreover, requests by NOAA researchers to share their research via media interviews and press releases may be further hampered because these researchers must also comply with their own agency's media interview and press release policies in addition to the Department of Commerce's. NOAA officials told GAO that because its media interview and press release policies lack clarity, they have been inconsistently interpreted by NOAA public affairs officials.

According to GAO's survey, NASA, NIST, and NOAA have made efforts to communicate their dissemination policies to their research staff, but many researchers are not confident that they know how to comply with some of the policies. The agencies have communicated their dissemination policies through staff meetings, on agency Web sites, and in limited formal training. While 90 percent of researchers are confident that they understand the policies for publications, only about 65 percent are confident they understand their agency's media interview and press release policies well enough to comply with them. Similarly, almost half of the researchers across the agencies are unsure whether their agency's policy allows them to discuss their personal views on the policy implications of their research. Finally, only 25 percent of researchers across the agencies are aware of a process to follow to appeal denials of requests to disseminate their research.

On the basis of responses to GAO's survey, 6 percent—or about 200 researchers—across NASA, NIST, and NOAA had dissemination requests denied during the last 5 years. One of the most common reasons researchers mentioned for these denials was that the topic of the research was sensitive or restricted for security reasons; in some cases, no reason was given. Most researchers at these agencies believe that their agency is more supportive of dissemination of research through publications and presentations, than dissemination through the media. Most NIST and NOAA researchers believe that their agency consistently applies the dissemination policies for each route of dissemination, while more researchers at NASA believe the agency consistently applies its policies for publications than believe the agency consistently applies its policies for press releases and interviews.