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25 March 2018

Our Decision-makers need Transparent Science Advice

Last month's departure of the Environmental Protection Authority's (EPA) Chief Scientist, Dr Jacqueline Rowarth, highlights the need for greater transparency in science advice to government.

Rowarth's departure came after the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, Sir Peter Gluckman, raised concerns with the EPA in December about remarks Dr Rowarth had made concerning irrigation. These concerns only came to light after an Official Information Act request by Radio New Zealand.

"The public only found out about Sir Peter's disagreement with Dr Rowarth's remarks this month", said NZAS Co-President Craig Stevens. "This was four months after she was reported as saying that irrigation was good for the environment."

The Association of Scientists is troubled that Sir Peter's concerns were not made public until uncovered by Radio New Zealand and that there was no significant effort by the EPA to correct the public record.

"The public was left in the dark over an issue that it clearly sees as important," said Stevens. "Good science advice must be transparent - the public shouldn't need the OIA to find out what its scientists are telling the government."

"Science does not operate effectively behind closed doors," noted Stevens. "It is all too easy to let personal biases influence scientific advice unless that advice is made public so it can be scrutinised by other experts."

Our ministries, regional councils, and industries are heading rapidly toward important decisions on these issue, and the wider public needs to be able to respond to consultation and understand how the evidence is being weighed.

NZAS Co-President, Dr Heide Friedrich, is chairing a conference in November that will examine pathways for science advice in New Zealand. This comes as Sir Peter Gluckman's term as the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor ends and will provide an opportunity for the wider New Zealand science community explore how to best deliver science advice.

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