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LOIS HENRY: Independent thought not wanted at UCLA

By The Bakersfield Californian

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I know you're going to wonder why you should care about some brainiac getting the boot at UCLA. So let me start by explaining why it matters, then we'll get to the nitty gritty of what happened.

It matters because it looks like UCLA is firing this guy because his work on air pollution doesn't fit with popular thinking and it wants to shut him up.

Popular thinking, that air pollution is killing us, is lucrative to universities by way of government-funded research grants.

The guy who's getting sacked, James Enstrom, was one of only a few scientists willing to stick his neck out and blow the whistle on an outright fraud and coverup at the California Air Resources Board (CARB) over regulations that will squeeze every wallet in this state once they're implemented.

Enstrom has been relentless, if not successful, in his efforts to get the air board to acknowledge that the science on the health effects of air pollution is not closed.

Moreover, he has demanded that the process of science-based regulation be honest, open and fair.

And that's why this really matters.

Out of step

Now, despite his 34 years as a researcher at UCLA, he's being dumped by a secret vote of the faculty in the Environmental Health Sciences Department.

Their official reason for not reappointing him is "your research is not aligned with the academic mission of the Department," according to a July 29 letter sent to Enstrom notifying him that his appeal of an earlier dismissal letter had been denied and his last day would be Aug. 30.

Department Chair Richard Jackson told me the faculty had no problem with scientific disagreement.

"They're not troubled by disagreement, but by poor quality science," he said, adding that "there are two sides to every story."

When I asked what about Enstrom's science had been subpar, Jackson said he would prefer I schedule a "formal interview" with him, which I did for the next day. He later canceled and referred me to Sarah Anderson, dean of communications for the School of Public Health.

Anderson e-mailed and asked what my questions were. I sent them and she replied that UCLA does not discuss personnel issues.

I objected that the faculty's opinion of Enstrom's published scientific work isn't a personnel issue.

I got nothing back.

Several other Environmental Sciences faculty members did not return my calls.

Beate Ritz, a leading air pollution scientist with UCLA who works in the Epidemiology Department, did respond.

She said she hadn't read Enstrom's 2005 study on air pollution.

But, based on his 2003 findings that second-hand cigarette smoke doesn't kill people, she said she knows him "for letting his interpretations go beyond the data and his personal biases to be strong enough to not allow for a balanced and appropriately cautious interpretation of the numbers."

Her attitude wasn't surprising to Enstrom, who said his 2003 paper, published in the British Medical Journal, was widely attacked.

"Not a single error was ever identified in that paper and I refuted all claims made against me and my research," he said. "My work isn't about being politically correct, it's about honest research and being faithful to the science."

Noted toxicologist Robert Phalen, who co-directs the Air Pollution Health Effects Laboratory at the University of California, Irvine, said Enstrom's science is very high quality. He theorized it has been Enstrom's outside activities, such as agitating at the air board, that did him in rather than his science.

"Jim was definitely out of step" with the direction of the leaders of his department, Phalen said.

Jackson himself alluded to that, saying the faculty were also troubled by Enstrom's presentation at a symposium in February put on by CARB to discuss the science examining air pollution's health effects. He didn't say exactly what about the presentation was upsetting.

Tangling with CARB

The Environmental Science mission statement says the department is "committed to furthering research and education at the interface between human health and the environment."

Enstrom has done exactly that with his studies, most notably one published in 2005 that shows no evidence of premature deaths in California due to exposure to PM2.5.

PM2.5 is tiny bits of dust and soot that CARB is trying to regulate to a gnat's hind end.

Specifically, CARB has regulations pending that would render today's trucking and heavy construction fleets inoperable in California.

The rationale for the regulations is that, based on numerous studies, PM2.5 kills thousands of Californians each year.

Enstrom's 2005 study was peer-reviewed and published in well-respected journals and, while some have disagreed with his conclusions, the study and its methodology have held up.

Yet, when a health effects report used to justify the new trucking regulations was written by CARB staffer Hien Tran, Enstrom's study was misquoted and discounted, as were others that don't support the notion that PM2.5 kills.

Tran, it was discovered by Enstrom and others, had lied about having a Ph.D in statistics from UC Davis.

Enstrom's bell clanging over Tran later revealed that CARB chairwoman Mary Nichols knew about Tran's falsification but kept mum to other board members until after they voted to approve the trucking rules.

As an aside, I'm still aghast that both Tran and Nichols have kept their jobs. Really, we can't find two people in the entire state who can do this job honorably?

Making friends

Back to Enstrom. He also single-handedly got scientist John Froines kicked off the Scientific Review Panel, a state organization tasked with identifying toxic contaminants.

And, as luck would have it, Froines is a voting faculty member of UCLA's Environmental Sciences Department.

It was the Scientific Review Panel that in the 1990s declared diesel exhaust is toxic. That declaration triggered CARB to gin up regulations to reduce the amount of diesel PM2.5 in the air, which is what brought on the truck and heavy equipment regulations we're now facing.

Scientists are supposed to apply for and be appointed to the Scientific Review Panel on three-year terms. Froines was appointed in 1984 and continued to sit on that panel for more than 25 years though he was only reappointed a couple of times in the early years.

It's not just an issue of needing new blood. The Scientific Review Panel verifies and approves methodologies for studies that are government-funded.

Froines is also head of the Southern California Particle Center, which conducts such government-funded studies. All of which makes his de facto lifetime appointment seem more than a little conflictly.

When Enstrom brought that to the attention of the Legislature, Froines was kicked off the panel.

I called Froines to see how he felt about that and his views on Enstrom but he didn't call back.

The offense of not going along

Enstrom told me he doesn't believe his colleagues have done bad science, per se, on air pollution.

His main concern has been with how one-sided and self-fulfilling the entire system has become.

CARB exists to regulate air pollution. It funds studies looking for ill effects of air pollution. Any effects found are used to justify more regulations and, hence, more studies.

Finding "no effects" doesn't fit into that cycle.

Then, of course, there's ego.

A scientist's work is considered more important if it points out a hazard rather than saying "everything's fine," Phalen said.

"Jim's work offends people because it diminishes the importance of their work," Phalen said.

Even accidental findings of "no effects" have been ignored.

In one major national study by Daniel Krewski, a map shows PM2.5 had little to no effect of premature deaths in California. And just recently Michael Jerrett revealed preliminary data from his CARB-funded California specific study that also showed little to no evidence of premature death from PM2.5 exposure.

That map has since disappeared from later uses of the Krewski study. And Jerrett has said perhaps mortality calculations should be changed.

"They've decided that no one else can have a say," Enstrom said. "Valid research is being stifled."

Enstrom had been in line to receive funding for a new study from the Health Effects Institute, but that likely won't happen after he loses his UCLA position.

All of this may seem like so much academic inside baseball. But these studies and how they're treated result in regulations that have real-life consequences.

Phalen noted that we are in a period in our culture where science is used to fuel movements rather than to elucidate. Going against the movement puts careers at risk.

Phalen himself is no stranger to swimming against the tide, having published a book in 2002 titled "The Particulate Air Pollution Controversy." He concluded that our hamfisted manner of setting environmental standards has created a regulatory environment that doesn't consider secondary consequences and may result in more harm than good.

Though Phalen couldn't say whether that book cost him his position on Froines' Southern California Particle Center, he wasn't reappointed after it was published.

So much for welcoming diversity of thought.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenny@bakersfield.com