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Scientists push campaign for evidence-based decision making from government

IVAN SEMENIUK - SCIENCE REPORTER

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Canadian science advocates say they are moving into a new phase in their campaign for evidence-based decision-making in government after a day of demonstrations across the country.

Organizers behind Monday's "Stand Up for Science" protests say they plan to focus on drafting policies that reflect best practices on research integrity and funding priorities and will urge the country's political leaders to adopt them.

Hundreds of participants gathered in 17 cities for rallies on Monday. In Toronto some donned lab coats while in Vancouver protesters were seen wearing gags adorned with the Conservative Party logo – a reference to the alleged muzzling of federal scientists by political overseers.

"We're really pleased with the turnout," said Katie Gibbs, a biologist and executive director of Evidence for Democracy, the Ottawa-based science advocacy group that co-ordinated the effort.

Dr. Gibbs and colleagues said they hoped the rallies would alert the public to scientists' concerns that the federal government has shifted funding markedly toward commercially driven research at the expense of public-interest science.

In a brief statement, Greg Rickford, federal minister of state for science and technology did not acknowledge the protests but said, "Our government is committed to science, technology, innovation, and taking ideas to the marketplace. Canada is ranked number one among G7 countries for its higher education expenditures on research and development."

"We are building on these successes to improve the quality of life of Canadians and to create jobs, growth and long-term prosperity."

Dr. Gibbs said her group would consult with the Canadian research community and look to other countries in trying to craft recommended policies for science in government. In recent years explicit scientific integrity rules have been adopted by many U.S. federal departments and agencies, after accusations of censorship and politicization of science during the administration of former president George W. Bush.

"Canadian scientists are where American scientists were maybe a decade ago," said Michael Halpern, a Washington, D.C.-based program manager with the Union of Concerned Scientists. "They're trying to figure out how to protect themselves from a government that's increasingly focused on message control over a more open discussion of the facts."

The Conservative government has been the target of scientists' ire in recent years for shuttering the Experimental Lakes Area in northern Ontario and for downsizing in other research areas that are relevant to climate and the environment.

In April, complaints that government scientists have been prevented from speaking to the media triggered an investigation by Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault. There is no word on when the investigation will be finished.

Mr. Halpern said that, as occurred in the U.S., the Canadian conversation must move past documenting individual instances of politicization of science to putting appropriate policies in place "so that these cases don't even come up."

Also on Monday, federal NDP science and technology critic Kennedy Stewart submitted a motion to Parliament that calls for significantly fewer restrictions on federal researchers communicating with the public.

Welcoming the motion, Dr. Gibbs added that public access to science is a non-partisan issue that she hoped all political parties would embrace. "We have no agenda besides wanting good science done in Canada and used to make good decisions," she said.

Others involved in Monday's events agreed. "There is ongoing interest in what we are saying," said Caroline Davis, the local organizer of a rally and barbecue in St. Andrews, N.B., where a federal biological station is operated by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. "People are shocked at the reduction in public science.