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May 29, 2013

The Honourable Keith Ashfield, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Fisheries and Oceans
House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister,

Earlier this year, the Nova Scotian Institute of Science (NSIS) received your letter of 21 January 2013 that responded to our concerns regarding Bill C-38. We thank you for your response. In our original letter (to the Prime Minister, 13 June 2012), we criticized some parts of C-38 and pointed out the importance of allowing federal scientists to freely communicate the results of their work. Your letter did not respond to this latter point.

Over the past few years, federally-employed Canadian scientists, including those within Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), have been hindered from freely communicating their research in professional and scholarly circles, and to the media. Any policy which interferes with researchers' ability to share publicly the results of their studies is completely contrary to universally accepted norms of scientific communication. Moreover, establishing primacy in publishing results in the highly competitive field of scientific research is essential in order that recognition be granted those generating new data and ideas. Interference with the freedom to publish will result in Canada, and Canadian scientists, not receiving the credit due for innovations discovered through publicly-funded work performed here.

Members of the press have reported that federal scientists must have the approval of a departmental communications staff person before speaking to the media. If this is the case, NSIS contends that it is a matter of grave concern. The research carried out by Canada's scientists is funded by the citizens of Canada. It is imperative that the research of federal scientists be made known to the public as soon as possible and that federal scientists be both permitted and expected to respond to questions about their work. Such an approach would demonstrate the commitment of the government to transparency and would lead to more informed and productive public dialogue and federal policy decisions.

As there is some uncertainty in public discourse regarding the ways in which DFO does or does not regulate the communication activities of its scientific staff, we suggest the public interest would be served by a frank and thorough explanation of departmental policy. The NSIS asks for such an explanation. To be specific, what directions, written or otherwise, are given to scientific staff regarding the communication of the results and conclusions of their work?

The Nova Scotian Institute of Science is a long-standing, learned society that promotes science in Nova Scotia and supports the dissemination of peer-reviewed scientific research. For example, the Institute publishes a scholarly journal and sponsors a monthly public lecture series that invites scientists to speak directly to attendees and respond to their questions. As an organization that believes in intellectual freedom, the Institute strongly objects to controls being placed by DFO and other Canadian federal departments on the free communication of scientific information. The Institute urges the Minister to encourage DFO scientists to speak freely about their research.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Rand
President, Nova Scotian Institute of Science