

GUEST ESSAY

I'm a Scientist Who Spoke Up About Climate Change. My Employer Fired Me.

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By Rose Abramoff

Dr. Abramoff is an earth scientist who studies the effect of climate change on natural and managed ecosystems.

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KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Shortly after the New Year, I was fired from Oak Ridge National Laboratory after urging fellow scientists to take action on climate change. At the American Geophysical Union meeting in December, just before speakers took the stage for a plenary session, my fellow climate scientist Peter Kalmus and I unfurled a banner that read “Out of the lab & into the streets.” In the few seconds before the banner was ripped from our hands, we implored our colleagues to use their leverage as scientists to wake the public up to the dying planet.

Soon after this brief action, the A.G.U., an organization with 60,000 members in the earth and space sciences, expelled us from the conference and withdrew the research that we had presented that week from the program. Eventually, it began a professional misconduct inquiry (it's ongoing).

Then, on Jan. 3, Oak Ridge, the laboratory outside Knoxville where I had worked as an associate scientist for one year, terminated my employment. I am the first earth scientist I know of to be fired for climate activism. I fear I will not be the last.

Oak Ridge said it was forced to fire me because I misused government resources by engaging in a personal activity on a work trip and because I did not adhere to its Code of Business Ethics and Conduct. The code has points on scientific integrity, maintaining the institution's reputation and using government resources “only as authorized and appropriate and with integrity, responsibility, and care.”

When Dr. Kalmus and I decided to make our statement during the lunch plenary session, I knew that we risked being asked to leave the stage or the conference. But I did not expect that our research would be removed from the program or that I would lose my job. When I began participating in climate actions with other scientists in 2022, senior managers at Oak Ridge asked that I make it clear to the public and the media that I spoke and acted on my own behalf. I followed these guidelines to the best of my ability, including at A.G.U., where Dr. Kalmus, a scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and I did not mention our institutions in our statements.

The retaliation I faced from the A.G.U. and Oak Ridge ultimately highlights a disappointing reality: that established scientific institutions will not even support scientists interrupting a meeting for the climate. I'm all for decorum, but not when it will cost us the Earth.

I used to be a well-behaved scientist. I stood quietly on melting permafrost in Utqiagvik, Alaska, and measured how much greenhouse gas was released into the atmosphere. I filled spreadsheets and ran simulations about how warming temperatures would increase the carbon emissions from soil.

To do my job, I dissociated the data I was working with from the terrifying future it represented. But in the field, smelling the dense rot of New England hemlock trees that were being eaten by a pest that now survives the warming winters, I felt loss and dread. Only my peers read my articles, which didn't seem to have any tangible effects. Though I saw firsthand the oncoming catastrophe of climate change, I felt powerless to help.

I did, however, believe that if scientists told the truth about the climate emergency, our scientific institutions would get out the message to policymakers, government officials, the media and the public. But they didn't — at least not sufficiently — even as carbon emissions continued to rise and the climate continued to warm.

A few years ago, Scientist Rebellion, an international network of scientists concerned about climate change, began a series of strategic acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. After years of waiting in vain for meaningful public action to address climate change, I decided to join them.

For my first action, I chained myself to a White House gate to demand that the Biden administration declare a climate emergency. Since I locked that first chain around my waist, I have been arrested three times in nonviolent actions. My superiors at Oak Ridge warned me to be careful but did not discipline me.

But I was motivated to continue because these scientist-led political campaigns have attracted positive media attention and contributed to major policy wins. At the end of last year, a group of us protested the impact of luxury travel at more than a dozen private airport terminals in 13 countries; within a month of our actions, the Podemos party of Spain submitted a request to the European Commission to take measures to reduce the use of private planes. When scientists take action, people listen.

The scientific community has tried writing dutiful reports for decades, with no reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels to show for it. It is time to try something new. We must work to change the culture of our institutions, be honest about our values, advocate for climate justice and experiment. Great experiments push at the boundaries of knowledge and propriety. They are risky, volatile, blasphemous. But when they work, the world changes.

Scientific institutions should support activism and advocacy, especially by experts. The A.G.U. should do more to publicly support policies informed by its members' science, such as declaring a climate emergency and ending fossil fuel extraction and subsidies.

I did not make the decision to become an activist lightly; I recognized that my actions would have consequences, and I knew that I could face retaliation. But inaction during this critical time will have far greater consequences.

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