

[House Passes Bill That Makes It Harder For Scientists To Advise The EPA](#)

by [Emily Atkin](#) Posted on November 18, 2014 at 6:07 pm

While their Senate colleagues were engaged in a [fiery debate](#) over the fate of the Keystone XL pipeline, the House on Tuesday quietly passed a bill that environmentalists say would hamper the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to use the best scientific information when crafting regulations to protect public health and the environment.

The House voted 229-191 to pass H.R. 1422, which would change the rules for appointing members to the Science Advisory Board (SAB), a group that gives scientific advice to the EPA Administrator. Also called the [Science Advisory Board Reform Act](#), the bill would make it easier for scientists with financial ties to corporations to serve on the SAB, prohibit independent scientists from talking about their own research on the board, and make it more difficult for scientists who have applied for grants from the EPA to join the board.

The purpose of the bill, according to Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX), is to increase transparency and accountability to the EPA's scientific advisors. Burgess said on the floor Tuesday that the board "excludes industry experts, but not officials for environmental advocacy groups." With this bill, Burgess said the inclusion of industry interests would erase "any appearance of impropriety on the board."

But [scientists](#), [environmental groups](#), and [health experts](#) have said that the bill compromises the scientific independence of the SAB, and makes it harder for the Board to do its job, thereby increasing the amount of time it takes to implement EPA regulations.

"The supposed intent [of the bill] is to improve the process of selecting advisors, but in reality, the bill would allow the board to be stacked with industry representatives, while making it more difficult for academics to serve," said Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) on the House floor on Tuesday. "It benefits no one but the industry, and it harms public health."

As it is now, the SAB does allow and include advisors with industry expertise. Of the board's current 51 members, which are appointed by the EPA Administrator for three-year terms, three have industry expertise. But bill sponsor Rep. Chris Stewart (R-UT) says that's not enough.

"All we're asking is that there be some balance to those experts, and that there further be transparency and understanding of who was selected, why they were selected, and why others were excluded," he said. "We're losing valuable insight and valuable guidance because we don't include them in the process."

While transparency and accountability is generally deemed a good policy move on both sides of the aisle, [some have accused](#) Rep. Stewart of having an ulterior motive for introducing the bill — a distrust of scientists, a dislike of the EPA, and support for the oil and gas industry. Indeed, Stewart [doubts the existence](#) of man-made climate change, and [has said](#) he would like to see the EPA dissolved.

“I get it, you don’t like science,” said Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) on the House floor on Tuesday. “And you don’t like science that interferes with the interests of your corporate clients. But we need science to protect public health and the environment.”

The Union of Concerned Scientists has come out strongly against the bill, particularly the portion that says SAB members can not participate in discussions that cite their own peer-reviewed research. Republicans say this would make scientists biased for their own work — but scientists say this makes no sense.

“This [bill] effectively turns the idea of conflict of interest on its head, with the bizarre presumption that corporate experts with direct financial interests are not conflicted while academics who work on these issues are,” the group’s director, Andrew A. Rosenberg, said in a [letter](#) to Congress. “Of course, a scientist with expertise on topics the Science Advisory Board addresses likely will have done peer-reviewed studies on that topic. That makes the scientist’s evaluation more valuable, not less.”

Despite the bill’s passage, however, it is unlikely that it will become law. The Senate does not have a similar bill nor does it plan to take one up, and the President Obama has already [pledged to veto](#) the bill if it comes to his desk.