Ms. Genna Reed  
Union of Concerned Scientists  
1825 K Street NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC  20006

Dear Ms. Reed:

Thank you for your May 6, 2022, email message on diversifying Federal Advisory Committees. I acknowledge the importance of this issue and appreciate the efforts that the signatory organizations are making to help identify and take action to improve diversity.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) fully recognizes the value of diversity, and we are committed to enhancing the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of our workforce and of the Federal Advisory Committees that help guide our science.

In March 2022, in response to the Presidential Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking and consistent with your inquiry, the USGS took an important step by updating the USGS Scientific Integrity Policy. The policy contains two new sections: “15. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility [DEIA] in Addressing and Strengthening Scientific Integrity” and “16. Integrity in Advice from Federal Advisory Committees.” The USGS is one of the first Federal organizations to incorporate DEIA into its scientific integrity policy. Importantly, the section on Federal Advisory Committees addresses both the independence of committee recommendations and the selection of committee members: “Products, reports, and recommendations to the USGS from Federal Advisory Committees are the findings of the Committee, not the USGS, and are not subject to Bureau revision. Committee membership is determined by career USGS officials based upon best practices, as well as applicable statutes and regulations, including ensuring broad diversity in representation.”

The USGS currently has 5 Federal Advisory Committees, including the:
1. National Geospatial Advisory Committee
2. National Cooperative Geologic Mapping Program/National Geological and Geophysical Data Preservation Program Advisory Committee
4. Scientific Earthquake Studies Advisory Committee
5. National Volcano Early Warning System Advisory Committee

There is one additional Federal Advisory Committee that has been statutorily authorized and that is in the process of being chartered, the Advisory Committee on Landslides.

All of our Federal Advisory Committees are authorized in statute. They each have corresponding constraints placed by their underlying statutes regarding committee membership and appointments.
The USGS is actively exploring several different ways to increase diversity in the nominees for and membership of these Federal Advisory Committees and ways to increase the engagement of the most affected and disadvantaged communities in particular.

For example, the USGS is evaluating how the charters of these committees can be updated to permit greater emphasis on diversity and community input in their membership. Given the statutory nature of our Federal Advisory Committees, changes to their charters can most easily be made when they are renewed. A challenge that would have to be overcome is that some Federal Advisory Committees charters have requirements for representation from specific areas of expertise and also have limits on the numbers of members.

The committee charters permit payment of travel expenses for members to attend meetings, but as currently written, do not provide compensation for committee members’ time spent working on the committee. We recognize this is a potential barrier to the membership in the committees of persons from disadvantaged communities. We will work with our human resources and contracting experts to determine how we can use the Special Government Employee status of Committee members to provide salary support for candidates from disadvantaged communities. We can then update Federal Advisory Committees charters as they are renewed to include this specific direction.

Because the Advisory Committee on Landslides is still being chartered, it provides us with the greatest flexibility in addressing diversity and equity in its membership. We welcome that the legislation authorizing this Federal Advisory Committee specifies the inclusion of representatives from tribal and territorial geological organizations on the Advisory Council. We will also, with input from our human resources and contracting experts, be able to write into its first Charter how we can engage and compensate members from disadvantaged communities.

I have asked the USGS Chief Scientist, the Associate Director of the Office of Administration, and the Directors of our Office of Science Quality and Integrity and Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity to assemble an expert panel that will work with the USGS programs advised by these Federal Advisory Committees to develop more concrete plans of action in how to move forward in this area.

In closing I want to reiterate the USGS commitment to enhancing diversity in and engagement of disadvantaged communities by our Federal Advisory Committees. I have designated our Chief Scientist, Geoff Plumlee, as our point person for this issue. He can be reached at 703-648-6403 and gplumlee@usgs.gov.

Sincerely,

David Applegate
Associate Director for Natural Hazards
Exercising the Delegated Authority of the Director
U.S. Geological Survey