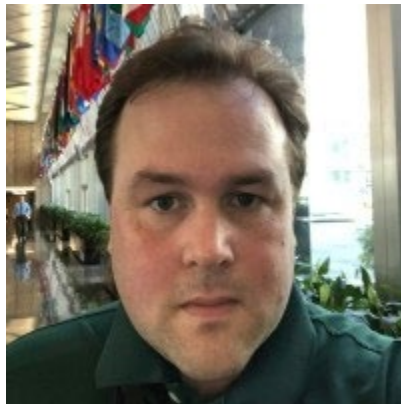


Standing Up for Science: An interview with Cole Donovan

Introduction

In July 2026 the nonprofit [Center for Open Data Enterprise](#) (CODE), in partnership with [NAPA](#) and the [Bridge Alliance](#), held a webinar on [Rewriting the rules: What's happening to public science?](#) Shortly afterwards, CODE president Joel Gurin conducted an email interview with [Cole Donovan](#), a leading advocate for advancing American science and scientists.



Cole is the Director of Science Policy and Advocacy at the [Stand Up for Science Foundation](#) (SUFS). His background includes positions at the Federation of American Scientists, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), the National Science and Technology Council, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, and the State Department. The following is Joel and Cole's conversation.

Joel Gurin: Tell us about Stand Up for Science. When was the organization launched, who started it, and why?

Cole Donovan: Colette Delawalla launched Stand Up for Science in early 2025 after the Department of Government Efficiency began implementing “banned words” lists on federal grants. Dr. Delawalla, then a PhD student, was told that she should avoid using words like “women” and “gender” in her proposal.

Frustrated by a lack of pushback from the scientific community, she went on to organize the international Stand Up for Science March rallies around the world. The new organization then started supporting federal scientists at places like the National Institutes of Health, Environmental Protection Agency, and NASA, and has continued to gain momentum ever since. We've been fortunate to have really good partners, not to mention strong grassroots support.

You have a very strong federal background in science policy. What led you to join this advocacy organization, and how does your role here draw on your previous work?

As the Europe officer in the State Department's Office of Science and Technology Cooperation, I had already watched purges of government scientists and administrators in places like Türkiye and Hungary in the mid-2010s, had first-hand experience working in the first Trump Administration, and had also worked to try to preserve the scientific communities of Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Russia during the Biden-Harris Administration. I felt particularly helpless during the purge of TUBITAK in Türkiye, which really started to ramp up while I was on paternity leave.

Experience during those crises had taught me that you can't ever take for granted the idea that someone else would swoop in to make everything right. You have to be willing to be that person.

Much of my previous work was spent advocating for scientists and the scientific community in foreign policy. I've successfully [pushed for changes](#) in EU rules to make it easier for transatlantic collaborations and led more adversarial negotiations. It's relatively natural for me to understand how policies fail and the system of incentives that lead to particular policy outcomes. It also helps when a large portion your job also involves demystifying how the American science and technology ecosystem works to unfamiliar foreign audiences.

I've also had a chance to see how certain incentives in the commercial space market lead to things like militarization and vendor lock, all of which is pretty directly transferable in the current policy environment.

As someone who has worked on science policy for decades, I'm interested to know how you see the current moment. What are the biggest challenges to the scientific community now?

The biggest challenge facing the scientific community, today, is understanding that this isn't politics as usual. The current administration consists mostly of folks who were fed up that they didn't get to do the things they wanted to do during Trump 1, and have spent four years reflecting on that failure.

This community generally hasn't had to pay attention to the transformation of American politics, thanks to decades of traditionally bipartisan support for science's "toplines" and an expectation that no one would ever think about causing harm to America's golden goose. This was never actually completely true - look at stem cell research, climate or clean energy research - but the overall numbers remained solid. It's really important that scientists around the country understand the transformation that's taking place, and for them to understand that [they're getting directly targeted, too](#).

There are some communities that understand this a bit more naturally than others. Climate researchers like Michael Mann (a SUFS board member) have had to endure attacks for decades. But what we're seeing now is of a completely different scale and scope.

Your biggest campaign has been against [the new proposed regulation from OMB](#), which would dramatically change the way research grants are reviewed and administered. How would you summarize the substance and the potential impact of that proposed regulation?

As I've told the media, the proposed changes would effectively represent the end of American science as we currently know it, not to mention how grants and cooperative agreements are allocated to institutions and support structures throughout the country.

The easiest way to describe the rule is that OMB is replacing systems of merit and need-based support while codifying the current administration's policy preferences and beliefs in the U.S. code. A lot of the language conflicts directly with agencies' statutory requirements - the National Science Foundation is actually required by law to do work related to disparate impact and educational disparities - and basic constitutional protections (not to mention empirical reality, like denying the fact that intersex people exist).

Any time you have a regulation that touches on this much money, it's going to have a lot of intersections with all corners of society in ways that folks don't expect. Take Moody's warning about credit rating downgrades, especially when there are interactions between federal funding and things like municipal debt.

One of the things that I've been personally focused on are the ways in which the rule creates perverse incentives that interact with safety and national security. If you look at my [personal comment](#), I spent a lot of time describing how ham-fisted restrictions and blanket bans on international cooperation actually make it harder to deal with relatively routine safety issues and undermine the feasibility of the government's own investments. Like on the International Space Station - how can government-sponsored research happen when the station and its crew depend on cooperation with the Russian Federation?

Why has this proposed regulation in particular been such a strong focus for your organization?

Size and scope—this is really the manifestation of how the government is trying to change the function of large segments of society, which includes institutions of higher education. That's the way that most non-government scientists interact with federal policy, so it makes sense that this would be a top priority.

What has the response been to your campaign? How many people submitted comments, and what were some of their most common themes?

The response is bigger than I could have imagined. When I worked on the research security programs at OSTP, we only had to review about 100 comments. It's fair to say that at least tens of thousands of people commented on this particular regulation, and more than 16,000 responses were submitted through the SUFS portal or our co-branded portals with partner organizations - more than 20 percent of those that have been posted at the time of this interview.

We tried to keep things accessible, so that people who simply wanted to say "I don't like this" would have the opportunity to do so while giving people who wanted to make deep and substantive comments the tools and training necessary to make those themselves. Analysis by folks like Chris Marcum and Abigail Haddad shows that we were overwhelmingly successful on that front. [Their analysis](#) suggests that a lot of comments focused on the politicization of science, but also on things like the regulation's broad economic impact and unintended consequences. The public also seems to have gotten the message about the importance of writing your own comment - most opponents wrote their own (sometimes quite lengthy) responses, while most of the comments in support of the regulation were a form letter.

What is the current state of the proposed regulation?

As far as we can tell, the regulation has not been sent to the Office of Information and Regulatory affairs just yet, so there are still several steps that have to happen before OMB issues their final agency action. Yet we're seeing a lot of the changes in this regulation working their way into established practices in government agencies.

The Senate recently overwhelmingly passed continuing resolution budget language that would prohibit OMB from moving forward with the regulation until December 11th, but that language has yet to be passed in the House.

What are the goals of SUFS for your next stages in this campaign?

This isn't over until the regulation is pulled and agencies are told to stop all efforts to align their programs with the regulation. First, we're trying to make sure that people are commenting on things like the National Science Foundation Guidelines on Financial Assistance, and helping organize folks looking to mount legal challenges.

We also want people to know that if the government looks like they've stopped working on it, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's gone away. The only way to get the rest of the government to halt implementation would be a formal memorandum from OMB directing agencies to stop.

We know that's not likely, but we also didn't think a Senate vote to delay the rule was likely, so we're going to keep pushing.

Are you finding that these issues resonate mostly with working scientists, or also with members of the public?

I think that most people instinctively understand what corruption is and what it looks like. There are certainly some changes, like peer review, that matter more to the scientific community, but I think most people who've had family with chronic conditions understand the importance of things like clinical trials.

It's also easy for people to understand that there's something that's fundamentally wrong with someone without any experience or expertise getting to pick and choose which awards win and which ones don't.

What other issues or campaigns is the organization taking on?

Anything that involves the misuse of science to cause harm, institutional destruction, or corruption in science and technology is fair game. This is why we've been so focused on the Department of Health and Human Services.

At the Stand Up for Science Foundation and our policy institute, we're going to continue educating people about the changes that are happening while making sure we save time to build a pathway toward a better future.

We've already released what will be the first of many initial proposals about how to [clean up the mess](#) this administration is leaving. Much of our focus is going to be on governing strategy. Watch this space.