Marchers show solidarity with U.S. scientists at Earth Day rally in Ottawa

Canada an example of what speaking out about science can accomplish, organizer says

Andrew Foote · CBC News · Posted: Apr 22, 2017 5:18 PM ET | Last Updated: April 22, 2017

Hundreds of people came to Parliament Hill for the Ottawa March for Science, one of hundreds of these rallies promoting well-funded, trustworthy science and science policies. (CBC)

Hundreds of people came to Parliament Hill Saturday to rally for well-funded, trustworthy science and show solidarity for American scientists who feel stifled by the policies of U.S President Donald Trump.

The March for Science in Ottawa was one of nearly 20 organized in Canada and more than 600 planned across the world on Earth Day, in response to the Trump's science policies.

The marches were modelled after January's Women's Marches.
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"We saw funding cuts for science and research [in the U.S.], government scientists told that they can't talk to the media about their work," said Katie Gibbs, one of the organizers of and speakers at Ottawa's rally.

"This is really alarming ... science matters for public policy, for our health, for our environment."

Jeremy Grimshaw, a senior scientist at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute, said that Trump's policies towards science have so far been "retrograde."

"They don't seem to reflect what we know from science to be good for America or the world," Grimshaw said.

"One of the major problems is the U.S. is often a leader, and there's a danger that other countries where you have people with similar agendas to Trump think they may be able to get away with it if he does."
Need for trust

The idea that science's credibility is at risk from politicians who want to twist research to fit their beliefs and allocate money accordingly came up both from speakers on the steps of the Peace Tower and in interviews in the crowd.

"I feel like as long as there's been science around, there's been people resisting it. And there have been people saying we don't need it, that change isn't important" said Joshua Walker, an Ottawa high school student who's going into the University of Ottawa's physics program in the fall.

"Problems like this — with fake news and fake science infiltrating science — is really shaking things up. It's shaking up the evidence base, it's making it look like [science] is untrustworthy," said Larissa Shamseer, a University of Ottawa PhD student.

Shamseer said she's performing what she called "research on [scientific] research" as part of her studies.

"We really need to show that we're putting money into [science] that the Canadian government and Canadians are interested in maintaining integrity in science."
Trump's office put out an Earth Day statement, saying that "rigorous science" is critical to protecting America's environment and growing the economy.

"My administration is committed to advancing scientific research that leads to a better understanding of our environment and of environmental risks," Trump said in the statement.

"As we do so, we should remember that rigorous science depends not on ideology, but on a spirit of honest inquiry and robust debate."

Learn from Canada

Another common sentiment at the Ottawa rally was that Canada's scientific community weathered a spotty relationship with the previous Conservative government, but is now on better terms with the Liberals.

Gibbs pointed to a 2012 "Death of Evidence" rally at the same location — during which government scientists and their supporters criticized former prime minister Stephen Harper's scientific funding cuts and policies — as an important example that scientific activism is important and works.

"We have seen an improvement on [Canadian science policies] in recent years," she said.
"It's great to see. Really, it's taxpayer dollars that fund the research that's done and the science that's done in government. We as taxpayers have the right to see that research."

For Brandon Paul, who came from Ohio to study hearing loss at the University of Montreal, the fact that Canada's approach toward scientific research has shifted in the past few years gives him hope.

“I think [Americans] can look to the Canadian model [and see] that, even though you're going through a period of hardship, there is another side to this," Paul said.
With files from Mireille Langlois