

November 4, 2004

Lola Olabode, M.P.H.
Project Manager
Human and Environmental Health
Water Environment Research Foundation
635 Slaters Lane, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314-1170

Dear Ms. Olabode:

As I have indicated to you and other members of the WERF PSC nominating committee by email and phone, financial conflicts of interest undermine trust in scientific research. Concerns about this problem are widespread in the scientific and public interest communities as evidenced by conflict of interest disclosure policies of prominent peer-reviewed journals, articles in leading scientific publications, congressional hearings, and the growing literature on scientific research ethics. Involvement of people and institutions with financial interests in planning research into health and environmental impacts of land-applied sludge constitutes a clear conflict of interest because the design, analysis and results of these studies could have important financial repercussions for sludge appliers.

Environmental and occupational health research has a long history of being distorted by financial conflicts of interest. Cases of the tobacco, lead, asbestos, pharmaceutical and chemical industries are widely known. During a historical period when the public is increasingly aware of these problems and distrustful of science and medicine, it is unwise to build a research program on a foundation, your PSC nominating committee, that has failed to address obvious conflicts of interest. You will produce more reliable and trustworthy research by adopting a strong conflict of interest policy at all stages of the process of developing and reviewing requests for proposals and managing funded research. To the extent that WERF as an organization is unable to do this, it will be necessary to ask other institutions to manage the process.

Given these problems and your unwillingness to address them, I must resign from the PSC nominating committee. I hope you will seriously consider my concerns.

Sincerely,

Steve Wing
Department of Epidemiology
University of North Carolina