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Gov't scientists need approval to help WHO

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WASHINGTON -- Government scientists must now be cleared by a Bush political appointee before they can lend their expertise to the World Health Organization, a change that a Democratic lawmaker said fits a pattern of politicizing science.

William Steiger, a special assistant to Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, said in an April letter that WHO can no longer pick specific government experts to serve as consultants.

The practice, which has been in place during several administrations, "has not always resulted in the most appropriate selections," Steiger said.

Instead, Steiger's Office of Global Health Affairs now will choose "an appropriate expert who can best serve both of our organizations," he said. HHS experts made available also must advocate U.S. government policies, Steiger said. He came to Washington with Thompson, Wisconsin's governor until President Bush appointed him to lead HHS in 2001.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., a frequent administration critic, said Friday it was the latest in a series of actions that in his view contradict the open search for scientific and medical evidence. "It appears to me that the administration is tightening their controls over their professionals and their scientists ... to favor its right-wing constituents," Waxman said.

He asked Thompson in a letter to rescind the policy, which Waxman said "politicizes the process of providing the expert advice of U.S. scientists to the international community."

Bill Pierce, Thompson's spokesman, said Waxman has it wrong. "It's in no way politicized," Pierce said. "This is a policy to make sure the WHO has the very best the federal government has to offer when it comes to our experts."

Senior officials also sometimes did not know who on their staffs were on loan to WHO and other organizations, Pierce said.

He said the policy has existed for about 20 years, but acknowledged it had not been enforced before. Waxman, however, called it unprecedented.

The California lawmaker also has complained the administration is subverting science to politics on a range of issues, including limiting federal funding for stem-cell research, cracking down on groups that promote condom use to combat AIDS and favoring programs that advocate abstinence as the only way to prevent the disease.