

# News in focus



ALEX WONG/GETTY

Eric Lander's departure will leave empty a position in US President Joe Biden's cabinet.

## RESEARCHERS FRUSTRATED AS BIDEN'S SCIENCE ADVISER RESIGNS AMID SCANDAL

Geneticist Eric Lander had a reputation for being a bully, scientists say, as they call for more inspiring leadership.

By Jeff Tollefson, Amy Maxmen, Alexandra Witze & Lauren Wolf

**T**he US scientific community is reeling after President Joe Biden's top science adviser, Eric Lander, announced his resignation on 7 February. A White House investigation had found that Lander violated the Biden administration's workplace policy by bullying and demeaning staff, according to a report from news outlet *Politico*.

Researchers hope that leadership will soon be restored to the Office of Science and

Technology Policy (OSTP), which Lander directed, so that it can continue with Biden's agenda – including creating a new biomedical-innovations agency and revamping the country's pandemic-preparedness plan. Some are already naming scientists who might be suited to replace Lander, who they say had a reputation for abrasiveness and aggression towards his colleagues.

"Eric Lander is a successful researcher, but everyone knows that he is a bully," says Kenneth Bernard, an epidemiologist and bio-defence researcher who has worked for the US government under several presidential

administrations. "He is widely known as arrogant and controlling," Bernard, who testified before a White House advisory panel co-chaired by Lander under former president Barack Obama, notes that such behaviour can be particularly problematic at government agencies, in which leaders must navigate varied viewpoints. "He was a bad fit from the beginning," Bernard says.

But some did not expect his tenure to end in this way. "I expected his ambition to temper his natural inclination to be the smartest person in the room," says Robert Cook-Deegan, who studies science and health policy at

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Arizona State University's Washington DC campus. "I really am surprised that it blew up like this."

### A disappointing situation

The *Politico* story revealed bombshell details of a toxic work environment at the OSTP (see [go.nature.com/3jzxnvxv](https://go.nature.com/3jzxnvxv)). Rachel Wallace, who had served as the office's general counsel and has worked for the OSTP across several presidential administrations, filed a complaint in September alleging that Lander had engaged in abusive behaviour, including aggressive and demeaning interactions, particularly with women in the office. The investigation found "credible evidence of instances of multiple women having complained to other staff about negative interactions with Dr. Lander", a White House official told *Politico*.

In a statement to *Nature*, an OSTP spokesperson said that the White House investigation, undertaken in late 2021, did not find "credible evidence of gender-based discrimination". It did, however, identify credible violations of the White House's Safe and Respectful Workplace Policy, the spokesperson said. The OSTP has not released the investigation report, and declined to do so to *Nature*, citing confidentiality surrounding personnel issues. Two congressional leaders have requested copies from Biden.

In his resignation letter to Biden, Lander says he is "devastated" at the harm his actions have caused, and that he takes full responsibility. "I have sought to push myself and my colleagues to reach our shared goals – including at times challenging and criticizing," he wrote. "But it is clear that things I said, and the way I said them, crossed the line at times into being disrespectful and demeaning, to both men and women. That was never my intention."

"This is obviously a deeply disappointing situation," said Jennifer Doudna, a biochemist at the University of California, Berkeley, in an e-mail to *Nature*. But she adds that challenges create opportunities. "I hope we learn from this moment and support greater diversity and equity in science careers."

The OSTP is now without a head, and Biden without a congressionally confirmed science adviser. The president must waste no time in appointing a replacement, says physicist Neal Lane at Rice University in Houston, Texas, who served as science adviser to former president Bill Clinton. "We just need, as quickly as possible, someone in the driver's seat who's respected inside and outside the White House," Lane says.

### Past controversies

When Biden nominated Lander as his science adviser in early 2021, many scientists were thrilled that the president had for the first time elevated the role of OSTP director to his inner circle of advisers – the cabinet – giving science

a seat at the table for high-level discussions. Lander had been a key figure in the race to sequence the human genome in the 1990s and early 2000s, and was the founding director of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a biomedical research organization. He also co-led the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) under Obama.

But at the time, critics noted his reputation for being at the centre of controversies. These included an essay he wrote about the history of the gene-editing technique CRISPR that did not properly credit two prominent women, including Doudna, for their discoveries; associations with disgraced financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein; and a toast he gave for James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, who has frequently voiced racist, ableist and misogynistic views. During Lander's confirmation hearing last May, several senators expressed concern about his meetings with Epstein and about his downplaying of women in science.

On his first day in office last June, in response to questions about these issues, Lander told *Nature* that "for 35 years, I have been doing a tremendous amount around the values of lifting up people and building institutions that are broadly inclusive. Those are where my values are, and that is really where my work is."

The Broad Institute, from which Lander took an unpaid leave of absence when he became OSTP director, did not reply to *Nature*'s questions about whether his position would be restored.

With the job of presidential science adviser open once again, researchers are recommending candidates who they think could turn things around. Bernard hopes that the next

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OSTP director will have had the experience of running a large, multisectoral science institute, such as a national laboratory, and will have navigated the intersection between policy, budget and science (see page 363). He and others have suggested potential replacements, such as Jill Hruby, currently undersecretary for nuclear security at the US Department of Energy; Frances Arnold, a biochemical engineer and Nobel laureate who co-chairs Biden's PCAST; and Jo Handelsman, a microbiologist who was associate director for science at the OSTP under Obama.

Gigi Gronvall, a biosecurity researcher at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, says that any replacement's management style will matter when it comes to being effective

at the agency, but also because they serve as a model. One of the OSTP's core missions should be to ensure US scientific leadership for the next generation, and that means creating an environment that encourages women and people from under-represented communities to remain in science (see page 361).

"I am hoping they push women, and especially women of colour, to the top of the list," says Emily Pinckney, executive director of 500 Women Scientists, an international advocacy group that wrote about its opposition to Lander's appointment in *Scientific American* in January 2021. She suggests that two researchers already at the OSTP are suited for the role: social scientist Alondra Nelson and ocean scientist Jane Lubchenco. "Representation matters," she says, explaining that challenges such as the pandemic and climate change disproportionately affect women and people of colour, and therefore scientists combating such issues must be able to connect with those communities.

### The road ahead

Most scientists expect the OSTP to continue its work under the leadership team assembled by Lander, but Cook-Deegan says the loss of the director comes at a crucial time.

Lander was in charge of Biden's Cancer Moonshot initiative, a revival of the Obama administration's effort to reduce rates of death from cancer, and he was leading efforts to create an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, a high-risk, high-reward funding agency to push for biomedical breakthroughs. He was also in charge of the search for a new director of the National Institutes of Health, following the retirement of Francis Collins last year.

"There's just a ton of work to get done, and OSTP is positioned to help on all these fronts," Cook-Deegan says.

Other initiatives at the OSTP, such as a push to promote environmental justice and revamp scientific-integrity policies across the federal government, might actually move more quickly with Lander out of the way, says Andy Rosenberg, who heads the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, an advocacy group in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "I think Lander was slowing things down" by wanting to be directly involved in so many of the things the OSTP is trying to do, he says.

The OSTP spokesperson says the office is well positioned to continue carrying out Biden's science agenda. "The president has been very clear that science has a seat at the table and we will protect scientific integrity in this government – and that will continue through this transition," they say.

Lander plans to leave the White House no later than 18 February.

Additional reporting by Nidhi Subbaraman