

Ethical Dilemmas and Climate Data Services at the U.S. Regional
Climate Centers

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The six Regional Climate Centers (RCCs) in the United States are funded through the National Climatic Data Center to provide data services to the public. Among the clients are attorneys, engineers, government agencies, researchers, and individuals. The following list includes ethical issues surrounding the provision of data to these clients. 1) The RCC's provide a service that people pay for, yet in some cases, the data are available elsewhere, eg., on the Internet or in a local or university library. Do we inform the client that these data are available for free or do we make them pay for our services? 2) When a client calls, looking for information involving severe weather over some length of time, making it clear they are looking for any event on which to file a claim, do we proceed in helping them? 3) If someone asks for data like another client has received, do we maintain proper confidentiality and not provide it to them? 4) Often lawyers ask us to testify regarding the veracity of the data, when we did not actually take the measurements. How far do we go in this regard?

Ethical issues also arise in the consulting arena, and several RCC personnel are involved in these activities. A sample of the problems that have arisen include the following. 1) There have been instances when lawyers have asked us to delete sections of reports, so that the information better supports their case through suppression of the information. 2) When we are hired by a client with a vested interest in the outcome of the research project, how do we not allow ourselves to be influenced by this? This raises the question as to whether our numbers would come out the same if there was no pressure or influence toward a certain answer. 3) A more unusual situation arises when we find ourselves in litigation while going up against a colleague or personal friend. A situation as such can complicate a friendship and maintaining composure can be difficult.

Whether the dilemma emerges through provision of data or through consulting services, our recommended guidance remains the same. If a client asks for data, we are obliged to provide it to them to the best of our abilities. We can attest to the fact that the data are as good as the observer, his/her training to be an observer (done by the NWS), and the QC/QA checks put in by NCDC and the RCCs. Regarding data services, it is then up to the public to use the data however they choose. In consulting, where interpretation of data becomes prominent, one must exercise common sense and let the data speak for themselves, whenever possible.