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One Down, Three to Go: Califf Joins FDA; NIH, ORI—and Now OSTP—Lack Permanent Leaders

By Theresa Defino

Francis Collins, who recently stepped down as NIH director, is now temporarily serving as President Biden's science adviser while the White House grapples with both replacing him at NIH and nominating an individual to take the adviser spot permanently.

Collins is partly filling roles played by Eric Lander, who resigned Feb. 16 as adviser and director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) following a bullying scandal that first saw the White House standing behind him.^[1] In announcing Collins as adviser, the White House also chose Alondra Nelson, currently OSTP deputy director for science and society, to be acting OSTP director.^[2]

Although the White House said these temporary appointments show President Biden has “doubled down on science,” the vacancies at OSTP and NIH join another at an agency pivotal to the research enterprise—that of the director of the HHS Office of Research Integrity (ORI), which enforces regulations prohibiting fabrication, falsification and plagiarism in HHS-funded research. Not only has ORI been without a permanent director this most recent time since at least June 2021, but the agency has had three directors in six years and endured prolonged stretches with acting leaders at the helm.

However, there is no longer concern about the lack of a permanent head for another crucial federal agency—the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Ending months of uncertainty, in February the Senate confirmed Robert Califf as commissioner, a post he held under President Obama.^[3]

In addition to serving as adviser, Collins will co-chair the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), the White House said. In naming Lander, President Biden elevated the director position to a cabinet level requiring Senate confirmation, something that the previous 10 directors did not have to undergo.

Collins and Nelson will serve “until permanent leadership is nominated and confirmed,” the White House said, indicating a single individual is expected to hold the positions Collins and Nelson are now sharing.

The statement briefly mentioned the White House is conducting a second search—that of Collins' replacement, which also requires Senate confirmation.

The White House called the selection of Collins and Nelson in their acting roles “responsive to the dual importance of a strong OSTP...and the very specific attention the President wants to give to the creation of a new ARPA-H [Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health] research and discovery agency, the building of support for a Cancer Moonshot, the search for a new head of NIH, and the broad advisory work of PCAST.”

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