

The Washington Post

Physicist ousted from research post after sending offensive tweet to Hispanic meteorologist

Timothy Dunkerton faces possible sanctions from the American Meteorological Society as it confronts how to address allegations of harassment

By Kay Nolan

February 6, 2022 | Updated February 8, 2022 at 11:05 a.m. EST

This story has been updated to include comments from a Twitter spokesperson.

A weather and climate research center has severed ties with a senior physicist in the atmospheric science community after he posted an offensive tweet directed at a Hispanic meteorologist.

Timothy J. Dunkerton of Bellevue, Wash., lost his job at NorthWest Research Associates (NWRA), effective Friday. He also faces possible sanctions from the American Meteorological Society (AMS), where [he is listed as a fellow](#) — an honor granted to select members. Fellows represent just two-tenths of 1 percent of all AMS members. Until now, there have been no well-publicized instances of the AMS pursuing specific actions in a case of alleged harassment.

The uproar began Feb. 2, when Dunkerton replied to a Twitter post by a meteorologist who is working with other bilingual colleagues to improve emergency communications to the country's Spanish-speaking residents. The meteorologist was announcing his new role as a weather-climate host for a Spanish-language podcast.

“When are you going to assimilate into America?” Dunkerton wrote.

Appalled by what Dunkerton wrote, Aaron Piña, a past chair of AMS's [BRAID](#) committee on diversity, called attention to it. “The screenshot shows a vile comment from a senior research scientist,” Piña tweeted. “We need to eradicate this behavior from the [#wx](#) / [#stem](#) fields.”

The situation is something that professional scientific societies have been formally addressing in recent years. The century-old AMS has held workshops on improving

diversity and on inclusion of women and minorities in the field, updated its [diversity statement](#) and, last year, posted formal [procedures](#) for addressing complaints of harassment, sexual or otherwise.

Scores of meteorologists expressed outrage over Dunkerton's tweet, some of them calling for him to be fired and [stripped](#) of professional accolades.

NWRA [quickly responded](#), stating that its board and senior scientists found Dunkerton's tweet "unwarranted & shockingly offensive."

The next day, the AMS tweeted that it was investigating the matter as part of its [Code of Ethics and Conduct](#).



Dunkerton [defiantly rebutted](#) and [mocked](#) the criticism, even [challenging his employer](#) to "be sure to answer in English" after one meteorologist [tweeted a query](#) about what action NWRA would take.

A severe-storm scientist from Poland who works at the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Norman, Okla., [suggested](#) that Dunkerton apologize and "realize that your comments are hurting people." Dunkerton then [replied](#): "When do you plan to assimilate in America? Poland is in my portfolio, as one of the last civilized nations on Earth. Please stay here."

Multiple people flagged Dunkerton's comments to Twitter. On Saturday, at least two users who reported the content shared that [Twitter's investigation](#) "found this account violated the Twitter rules" against abuse and harassment. Dunkerton was still active on Twitter at the time of this article's publication on Sunday afternoon.

Dunkerton [replied](#) to one Twitter report: "Sorry I'm here."

On Monday, a Twitter spokesperson told The Post "the account owner was required to delete the violative content before regaining access to their account." However, the Feb. 2 tweet was still posted as of Tuesday around 11:40 a.m. Eastern, and Dunkerton's account still remains active. His other questionable and combative tweets, some directed at scientists, are also still posted.

Dunkerton's online conduct was too much for Joan Oltman-Shay, president of Seattle-based [NWRA](#), which also has offices in Boulder, Colo. and Monterey, Calif. Founded in 1984 by three research scientists who wanted to work independent of big companies, NWRA has roughly 70 employees who do grant-based and contract research for NASA, the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Air Force, as well as for universities. Oltman-Shay told The Post that Dunkerton was one of the company's earliest employees, in the 1980s, but within the past several years has worked only part-time — sometimes as little as two hours per month — for NWRA. It is not known whether Dunkerton is otherwise employed.

"We never see him," Oltman-Shay said. "He's predominantly an independent corroborator with others. He's a fellow and a journal editor," she said. "He hasn't been working on any of our projects much at all."

In the past year, Oltman-Shay said, she and other company leaders had become concerned about comments Dunkerton had been making on social media, in which he ranted against climate change science and expressed opinions against the [coronavirus](#) vaccines.

Dunkerton recently [tweeted](#): "I regret to inform the sheep that CO₂ has no discernible nor demonstrable effect on weather."

Separately, he referred to places that require coronavirus vaccines as "[Nazi land](#)" in a tweet.

While such opinions bothered his colleagues at NWRA, which does extensive climate research, NWRA's board hesitated to act, Oltman-Shay said, reasoning that questioning science is not the same as harassment and that, given his "tenure," Dunkerton had the right to express his personal views.

"He's an extremely well-established and internationally recognized scientist who, once upon a time, was a leading expert in his field," Oltman-Shay said. "You have to be careful about censoring thought. Differing opinions need to be allowed, even if they go against science."

When an employee at NWRA pointed out Dunkerton's Feb. 2 tweet, however, Oltman-Shay said she knew a line had been crossed, constituting harassment, which is prohibited in NWRA's code of ethics. She was dismayed to discover other objectionable tweets, some going back months. There was an uproar among NWRA's staff, which she describes as ethnically diverse, high-caliber scientists who typically limit Twitter activity to posting scientific data or papers.

"We've never experienced anything like this — it's been a fast-moving firestorm," Oltman-Shay said. "We've blocked him on Twitter. We explained what he was doing."

NWRA later confirmed Dunkerton's termination.

Attempts by The Post to reach Dunkerton via phone and email were unsuccessful.



While declining to discuss the controversy, Mary Glackin, a past president of AMS, said it "will definitely be a learning experience" to test newly instituted procedures to guard against harassment. She said that at least one other complaint involving social media posts had been lodged in the past few years but that the organization did not expel the AMS member in question.

AMS Executive Director Stella Kafka did not respond to a request for comment. AMS president-elect Bradley Colman would not agree to an interview on the Dunkerton issue but sent an email statement that said, "More generally, I can assure you that the AMS takes diversity, equity, and inclusion very seriously and is committed to providing a welcoming environment to all members and associates."

Piña said he brought the Dunkerton tweets to the society's attention under the adage of "If you see something, say something."

Piña wrote a personal email to AMS leadership regarding the matter, besides tweeting about it and advising members how to file complaints.

“People filled out complaint forms all evening and into the next day — they received a barrage of complaints,” said Piña, adding he has “full confidence” that the AMS will follow through, even if the process moves more slowly than some people would like.