

UPR geology head denies PREPA influence

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The Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority has "absolutely no influence" on geology professors at the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez Campus, said the department head Monday in response to allegations by professor William McCann.

Professor Alan Smith denied McCann's claim that PREPA is using the geology department, with which it has a consulting contract, to control the Seismic Network.

As director of the Seismic Network, McCann has criticized Puerto Rico's earthquake preparedness. He claims Smith imposed a gag order on him in October after McCann questioned the wisdom of PREPA's building a power plant on the west coast.

"PREPA has absolutely no influence on the geology department," said Smith. He said the utility did call him in October to ask why the department had apparently taken a public position on the proposed power plant, but he reminded them that

McCann was speaking for himself, not for the department.

Smith said the consulting contract with PREPA calls for the department to assist with oil drilling near Toa Baja.

"It's no different from hundreds of other consulting contracts the university has with government agencies," said Smith. He said the present contract pays the university \$200,000 over 18 months, "but much of that goes to outside concerns, for example people who analyze soil samples."

Smith acknowledged that two geology professors — Alejandro Soto and James Joyce — are partners in a consulting firm called Geocaribe, but denied that they might have an interest in quelling earthquake fears.

"They're involved in things like road construction," said Smith. "A change in building codes would have nothing to do with them."

Smith sent the STAR a copy of a letter from four geology professors, including Smith, to Chancellor José Martínez Picó seeking a public statement of support.

McCann's colleagues staged a protest last week to pressure Martínez Picó, who will step down Wednesday, into removing McCann as head of the Seismic Network, a position that pays \$6,000 a year. They said in an open letter to "the people of Puerto Rico" that they feared the acting chancellor may not be in a position to act.

The Associated Press reported Monday, however, that mathematics professor Pablo Rodriguez, who becomes acting chancellor Thursday, says he is ready to take action in the case.

Rodriguez said he will listen to all parties before making a decision.

Smith would not speculate on how long, McCann will last as Seismic Network director, nor as a geology professor. McCann has taught at UPR Mayaguez for four years and would qualify for a permanent position after his fifth.

"The recommendation for his dismissal has nothing to do with his teaching," said Smith. "He's a perfectly competent scientist."

Smith added, however, that he believes McCann has abused his position as Seismic Network head.