

RETHINKING SCIENCE AND SOCIETY
DECISION-MAKER SURVEY

Executive Summary

January 2007



EKOS
Research Associates Inc.

Copyright 2007©

EKOS Research Associates Inc.

No part of this report may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from EKOS Research Associates Inc.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interest and Desire for Inclusion in Research Decisions

Survey results reveal that despite widespread media attention given to scientific advances in areas such as health, the environment and technology, both decision-makers and the broader general public have a keen interest in learning more about science and research. Six in ten general public respondents feel they have too little information about the impact of science and research on Canadian society, and only two per cent feel they have too much information about this issue. Decision-makers are even more inclined to cite a deficiency in the amount of information they have about the impact of science and research on Canadian society – 72 per cent say that they have too little information about this issue.

Decision-makers and the Canadian public were also asked to rate the extent to which they felt that individual Canadians should be given the opportunity to influence the type of research pursued by government, universities and business. Results reveal that both decision-makers and the general public would value a greater voice in research decisions, however, this desire is considerably more pronounced among the general public. At least six in ten general public respondents agree that individual Canadians should be given more opportunity to influence the type of research pursued by government (68 per cent), universities (62 per cent), and business (60 per cent). Notably fewer decision-makers (though still a sizeable proportion) agree that individual Canadians should have more input into the research pursued by government (53 per cent), universities (46 per cent), and business (44 per cent).

Perceptions of Canada's Investment in Science and Research

According to Statistics Canada, the Government of Canada allocated approximately \$9 billion during the 2005/2006 fiscal year to science and technology spending, the majority of which was directed to research and development.¹ Despite this substantial allocation, we find that both the general public and decision-makers generally feel that Canada spends less in this area than other countries, and decision-makers are particularly inclined to feel this way.

¹ <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/051208/d051208d.htm>

Nearly six in ten general public respondents believe that Canada's investment in science and research is less than that of the U.S. (57 per cent) or Japan (56 per cent), and the plurality (41 per cent) feel our science and research investment is less than that of China. Looking at decision-maker views on this issue, results reveal that fully seven in ten decision-makers perceive Canada's spending on science and research to be less than that of Japan or the U.S., and over half (53 per cent) feel Canada spends less than China in this area.

Role of Government

The Rethinking Science and Society study also examined views on whether the Government of Canada should conduct research or fund the research conducted by the private sector and universities. Results reveal that both decision-makers and the general public prefer that research be funded by the Government of Canada, rather than being conducted by the Government itself.

A majority of general public respondents (52 per cent) say they prefer the Government of Canada fund research conducted by the private sector (and only 37 per cent prefer the Government conduct the research itself). Decision-makers are even more likely to say they prefer that the Government of Canada fund private-sector research (64 per cent), and only one in four (27 per cent) prefer the Government of Canada conduct the research directly.

Turning to university research, results reveal that fully eight in ten general public respondents (83 per cent) say they prefer the Government of Canada fund research conducted by universities, and only ten per cent prefer that Government conduct the research directly. Decision-maker views on this issue are very similar to those of the public as a whole: 84 per cent express a preference for Government-funded research conducted by universities, and only one in ten indicate a preference for the Government to conduct the research itself.

Rethinking Science and Society results also indicate that both decision-makers and the general public feel governments should be spending more on science and research. More than two-thirds of general public respondents (68 per cent) and seven in ten decision-makers (71 per cent) feel that governments should spend more to strengthen Canada's science and research capacity.

Views on Science and Research

Turning to public and elite views on science and research in general, results reveal high levels of optimism about the promise of science and research. More than three-quarters of general public respondents agree that science will solve a lot of society's problems like disease and pollution, and more than seven in ten think science is helping us use our natural resources in a more sustainable way. Decision-makers also strongly believe in the benefits of scientific advances: three-quarters believe in science's ability to contribute to sustainable development, and seven in ten think that scientific advances will help solve societal problems like disease and pollution.

Despite generally favourable views about science and research, both decision-makers and the public at large also express concern about ethical issues associated with scientific advances. Two-thirds of the Canadian public (63 per cent) and almost six in ten decision-makers (57 per cent) feel that scientific advances are developing faster than our capacity to deal with the ethical issues associated with them.

