

Politics Reasserts Itself in the Debate Over Climate Change and Its Hazards

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Just as the global climate ebbs and surges, with droughts followed by deluges, so does the politically charged atmosphere that has long surrounded research pointing to potentially disruptive global warming.

The political turbulence always seems to intensify when there is momentum toward actions to limit smokestack and tailpipe releases of carbon dioxide, the main heat-trapping greenhouse gas, which most experts link to rising temperatures.

Such a surge occurred last week. Scientists who have called for action and those who say risks from warming are overblown agree that it has been many years since research on warming has been the subject of such a vigorous assault.

The week started with an effort by Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut, to force a vote on their proposed bill requiring eventual limits on emissions of greenhouse gases.

Opponents of curbs on emissions responded with an intensive challenge to the broadening scientific consensus on global warming. Around the capital, there was a flurry of debates, Senate speeches, inflammatory editorials and talk-show commentaries, some contending that global warming was an alarmist fantasy and others saying action was essential.

In a two-hour speech on July 28 on the Senate floor, Senator James M. Inhofe, the Oklahoma Republican who is chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said:

"With all of the hysteria, all of the fear, all of the phony science, could it be that man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people? It sure sounds like it."

Mr. Inhofe convened a hearing on Tuesday that focused on the work of the small core of researchers who insist that there is no evidence for human-caused warming of any import. A spokesman for Mr. Inhofe, Michael Catanzaro, defended the hearing, saying its goal was "to strip away political factors and just get to the hard science."

But both believers and skeptics said the events vividly illustrated how politics could contort science. Instead of

the standard scientific process in which researchers sift disparate findings for common elements to build consensus, they say, partisans seem to be sifting only for the findings that fit their agendas.

Dr. Roger A. Pielke Jr., director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado, said the partisanship seemed to be spreading beyond officials and interest groups.

"On the climate issue, we appear to be on the brink of having Republican science and Democrat science," said Dr. Pielke, who has long espoused acting to limits risks from warming. "If so, then this simply arrays scientists on opposing sides of a gridlocked issue, when what we really need from scientists is new and practical alternatives that might depoliticize the issue."

Skeptics agreed that politics was invading the practice of climate science.

"Climate science is at its absolutely most political," said Dr. Patrick J. Michaels, a climatologist at the University of Virginia who, through an affiliation with the Cato Institute, a libertarian group in Washington, has criticized statements that global warming poses big dangers.

The Inhofe hearing aside, Dr. Michaels said, his fear is that minority scientific voices will eventually be squelched by mainstream views.

But many of the scientists who warn of dangers say the real risk arises from confusion that a handful of skeptical scientists has perpetuated. That prolongs the debate over how to respond, those scientists say.

Strangely, the fresh attacks on climate science have come even as some skeptics' projections on warming, including those of Dr. Michaels, have started to overlap with those of the dominant group of researchers.

Dr. Michaels, in a recent paper, projected that the global average temperature was most likely to rise about 3 degrees from 1990 to 2100. That is three times as much as the rise measured in the 20th century and within the mainstream projections that skeptical scientists had in years past criticized as alarmist.

The fight has evolved from clashing over human actions and whether they are warming the planet to portraying the consequences of warming as harmful, insignificant or even beneficial.

The last big peak in politics-tinged attacks over global warming came in 1997, when months of lobbying preceded international consensus on the Kyoto Protocol, the first treaty that required industrialized countries to reduce heat-trapping smokestack and tailpipe emissions.

That pact, though rejected by the Bush administration, has been embraced by almost all other big nations and needs only ratification by Russia to take effect.

After Mr. Inhofe's hearing, both sides quickly claimed victory, scoring the hearing like a sports event.

Republican strategists said the widely divergent views on global warming expressed by the three invited scientists - two longtime skeptics and one scientist who has built the case for concern - reinforced the idea that climate science was still split. That is a crucial goal of industries and officials who are fighting restrictions on emissions.

Advocates for cuts in emissions and scientists who hold the prevailing view on warming said the hearing backfired. It proved more convincingly, they said, that the skeptical scientists were a fringe element that had to rely increasingly on industry money and peripheral scientific journals to promote their work.

The hearing featured Dr. Willie Soon, an astrophysicist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and a co-author of a study, with Dr. Sallie Baliunas, also an astrophysicist at the center, that said the 20th-century warming trend was unremarkable compared with other climate shifts over the last 1,000 years.

But the Soon-Baliunas paper, published in the journal *Climate Research* this year, has been heavily criticized by many scientists, including several of the journal editors. The editors said last week that whether or not the conclusions were correct, the analysis was deeply flawed.

The publisher of the journal, Dr. Otto Kinne, and an editor who recently became editor in chief, Dr. Hans von Storch, both said that in retrospect the paper should not have been published as written. Dr. Kinne defended the journal and its process of peer review, but distanced himself from the paper.

"I have not stood behind the paper by Soon and Baliunas," he wrote in an e-mail message. "Indeed: the reviewers failed to detect methodological flaws."

Dr. von Storch, who was not involved in overseeing the paper, resigned last week, saying he disagreed with the peer-review policies.

The Senate hearing also focused new scrutiny on Dr. Soon and Dr. Baliunas's and ties to advocacy groups. The scientists also receive income as senior scientists for the George C. Marshall Institute, a Washington group that has long fought limits on gas emissions. The study in Climate Research was in part underwritten by \$53,000 from the American Petroleum Institute, the voice of the oil industry.

Critics of Mr. Inhofe noted that he said in his speech last week that his committee should consider only "the most objective science."

In an interview on Friday, Dr. Soon said he separated his affiliation with the advocacy groups from his research.

"I have my views on things," Dr. Soon said. "But as a scientist I'm really interested in what are the facts."

After such a raucous week, Dr. Soon seemed eager to return to the relatively quiet realm of academic debate. "We should all just try to resolve this issue," he said, "instead of going into a Senate hearing with all this circus."

The circus, however, promises to return to town. The Senate has agreed to vote on the McCain-Lieberman bill in the fall.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/05/science/earth/05CLIM.html?ex=1061039772&ei=1&en=e375157f88793e9f>