

Congressional hearings detail political tampering in US climate research

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Hearings resumed March 19 in the US Congress on charges of political interference in governmental climate research. The evidence and testimony further demonstrate the lengths the Bush administration, at the behest of the oil industry, has gone to suppress scientists' findings and confuse public opinion of climate change.

Among those testifying before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform were prominent NASA scientist James Hansen and a former officer from NASA Public Affairs, George Deutsch. E-mails presented at the hearing confirmed that Deutsch's responsibilities as a PA officer included preventing Hansen from speaking about climate data with reporters, a fact that Bush administration officials have repeatedly denied.

Hansen, who is the director of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies (GISS), recounted several instances of interference. In one case, one of his staff members submitted a press release based on a GISS paper that found the ocean was less effective at removing human-made carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than had previously been estimated. Public Affairs decided that this story could not be provided to the media.

Another staff member, Hansen testified, was made to attend a "practice" press conference, where he was asked whether anything could be done to stem the accelerating loss of sea ice. When he suggested, "We could reduce emissions of greenhouse gases," he was told by officials, "That's unacceptable!" Hansen told the House committee that Public Affairs had insisted, "scientists are not allowed to say anything that relates to policy."

Following a public talk Hansen gave in 2004, in which he mentioned the practice of muzzling climate data, the NASA assistant administrator for public affairs traveled from headquarters to the Goddard Space Flight Center and gave what Hansen called an "oral 'dressing down' of the professional writer at Goddard Public Affairs who had informed me about this practice."

The writer, Hansen said, "was admonished to 'mind his own business.'" Such reprimands and instructions, Hansen said, are delivered orally so as to leave no paper trail. This way, "If NASA headquarters Public Affairs is queried by media about such abuses," Hansen testified, "they respond 'that's hearsay!,' a legal term that seems to frighten the media."

The deliberate lack of written records indicates that administration officials are well aware of the inappropriate and

essentially illegal character of restricting scientists' speech.

However, a series of memos and e-mails in late 2005 detailed instructions on constraining public speech, after Hansen presented GISS climate data to the American Geophysical Union. The GISS analysis demonstrated record global temperature in 2005, a finding that sparked unwanted media attention for NASA.

In response, Public Affairs issued tight regulations on Hansen, including a requirement that media interviews be approved beforehand, with NASA headquarters having "right of first refusal," and that Hansen obtain approval of any posting on the GISS web site. Hansen testified that while these orders were delivered orally, along with a threat of "dire consequences" for non-compliance, the new Public Affairs officer over him, George Deutsch, left written descriptions of the rules.

Deutsch had worked for Bush's reelection campaign before dropping out of college and taking the appointment for Political Affairs at NASA. Several of his e-mails presented during the hearing plainly demonstrated that NASA leadership was stifling Hansen's contact with the press. In one, Deutsch wrote, "Senior management has asked us not to use Jim Hansen for this interview." In another e-mail, it was discussed who could appear in Hansen's stead to deliver Bush administration talking points: "Are [sic] main concern is hitting our messages and not getting dragged down into any discussions we shouldn't get into."

Hansen's experience is by no means unique. A January survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists found that six in ten federally employed scientists experienced political interference over the past five years, and half were pressured to remove the words "climate change" and "global warming" from their work.

During the hearing, Representative Darrell Issa, Republican of California, ludicrously suggested that it was Hansen who was attempting to curb science and free speech. According to the *New York Times*, Issa claimed that by speaking out against White House efforts to inject uncertainty on global warming research, Hansen had become "an advocate for limiting the debate." Hansen replied, "What I'm an advocate for is the scientific method."

The White House has enormous control over scientific research via the allocation of funds. Along with the various other restrictive measures, punishment by the administration of outspoken climate researchers has also taken the form of budget cuts.

Hansen pointed out that when the Bush administration unveiled its 2007 budget, NASA's science programs were given a funding increase of 1 percent. Yet Earth Science Research and Analysis

faced a staggering 20 percent cut, which was to be enacted by cutting retroactively from the 2006 budget. Hansen remarked, “One way to avoid bad news: stop the measurements!”

“One-third of the way into fiscal year 2006,” Hansen explained, “NASA Earth Science was told to go figure out how to live with a 20-percent loss of the current year’s funds.” The cuts shelve most satellite missions and support for contracting and young scientists.

This comes at a time when NASA satellites are yielding important results. Two satellites measuring the Earth’s gravitational field, for example, found that the mass of Greenland is now decreasing by around 150 cubic kilometers of ice each year. West Antarctica’s ice depletion registered a similar loss. The area of ice sheets with melting has increased substantially, resulting in a doubling in the flow of ice streams, and the area in the Arctic Ocean with summer sea ice has decreased by 20 percent over the past two and a half decades.

Since the first part of the hearings on January 30, the panel has received eight boxes of relevant documents from the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The documents, released amidst Monday’s testimony, strongly support the charges of Hansen and others that the White House made an organized and deliberate effort to mislead the public about the dangers posed by climate change through the editing of government climate reports.

One of those charged with this undertaking was former CEQ chief of staff Philip Cooney, who resigned from his position in 2005 after the *New York Times* reported that he had made hundreds of edits to climate reports. After quitting, Cooney quickly landed a job at ExxonMobil; prior to his appointment, he was the “climate team leader” for the oil industry’s lobbying agency, the American Petroleum Institute (API).

In his congressional testimony March 19, Cooney said his work was “solely to promote the public policies of President Bush and his administration.” Indeed, the present administration, with its inseparable linkages to the oil industry, appointed him for precisely this purpose.

Documents showed at least 181 edits to the administration’s *Strategic Plan of the Climate Change Science Program* made by Cooney other CEQ officials, aimed specifically at exaggerating scientific uncertainties, and at least 113 edits to the same document for the express purpose of diminishing the importance of the human contribution to global warming.

Cooney also inserted numerous references to supposed possible benefits of climate change, while removing references to taking action to combat global warming based on the scientific evidence. He deleted references to the threat climate change posed to human health, society, and habitation, edits that he justified by saying he felt they “risked overstating human health impacts.”

He also removed references in the administration’s plan to the comprehensive *National Assessment of the Potential Consequences of Climate Variability and Change* after an interest group funded by the API sued the government over the report’s linking of global warming to the burning of fossil fuels.

Significantly, Cooney deleted any reference to average surface temperature reconstructions, which indicate they have been rising over the last millennium. In multiple places, he changed the words “global change” to “climate variability and change” to suggest

that the current warming trend was part of a natural process.

The hearing committee made special note of dozens of alterations that amounted to reversals or negations of conclusions. For example, after a discussion of climate data in the draft, Cooney proposed insertion of the following sentence: “The negative commentary asserted that certain assessment efforts were exaggerated, contrived, or otherwise unsubstantiated.”

The June 2003 *Strategic Plan* draft read: “Climate modeling capabilities have improved dramatically in recent years and can be expected to continue to do so. As a result, scientists are now able to model Earth system processes and the coupling of those processes on a regional and global scale with increasing precision and reliability.” CEQ had this passage eliminated.

Most of the alternations were subtler, but had the effect of casting excessive doubt on already cautious and conservatively worded scientific findings. For instance, in one passage, the draft read, “Warming temperatures will also affect Arctic land areas.” As in dozens of other passages, Cooney replaced the word “will” with the word “may” resulting in a statement of complete uncertainty. Similarly, in numerous places, Cooney added the word “potentially.”

During his deposition March 12, Cooney was questioned about the *Strategic Plan* as well as the climate section of a major EPA report that CEQ insisted be altered in similar fashion. The CEQ exerted so much pressure, insisting on hundreds of edits, that the EPA eventually cut the entire section out of the report.

Related PDF files from the Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearings are available through the committee’s web site.

<http://oversight.house.gov/story.asp?ID=1214>



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