

US scientist calls for prosecution of energy company CEOs for global warming disinformation

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26 June 2008

In testimony before the US Congress on Monday, James Hansen, a leading climatologist, called heads of major energy companies criminals who should be prosecuted for deliberately spreading false and misleading information about the threat posed by global warming.

Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS), testified before the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming to mark the 20th anniversary of his initial appearance before Congress in 1988. He generated the first significant public awareness of the issue of global warming by telling the Senate at that time that manmade greenhouse gasses were raising global temperatures.

Since then climate scientists have reached a virtually unanimous consensus that the burning of oil and other fossil fuels results in additional atmospheric carbon dioxide, trapping heat. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased greatly over the last century, and global temperatures are rising as a result.

"We have reached a point of planetary emergency," Hansen told the Congressional panel Monday, saying the world was near a "tipping point" where climate change "would spiral dynamically out of humanity's control."

He compared the role of Exxon Mobil and other energy conglomerates, which have attempted to stoke doubts on scientific findings related to global warming, to the role of tobacco companies that denied the dangers of smoking. "CEOs of fossil energy companies know what they are doing and are aware of the long-term consequences of continued business as usual. In my opinion, these CEOs should be tried for high crimes

against humanity and nature."

Hansen warned, "Elements of a 'perfect storm,' a global cataclysm, are assembled." He said that the climate could reach a point "that amplifying feedbacks spur large rapid changes." He cited the melting of Arctic sea ice as one example. An even greater catastrophe looms with the melting of Antarctic and Greenland ice sheet, which would raise global sea levels at least two meters. "Hundreds of millions of people would become refugees," he said.

Global warming will lead to the extinction of species, the spread of arid regions, stronger floods, droughts, forest fires and the drying up of lakes unless it is halted, he continued.

Hansen decried the extremely limited official goals set for reducing carbon emissions calling them "a recipe for global disaster." He called for a moratorium on the construction of coal burning power plants and the development of carbon free alternatives to coal and petroleum.

Hansen indicted the energy conglomerates for blocking action on global warming. "Instead of moving heavily into renewable energies, fossil fuel companies choose to spread doubt about global warming, just as tobacco companies discredited the link between smoking and cancer. Methods are sophisticated, including funding to help shape school textbook discussions about global warming."

He also denounced the fossil fuel industry for using "China and other developing nations as scapegoats to rationalize inaction."

The media paid very limited attention to Hansen's remarks, particularly his attacks on the energy companies. The *New York Times* in its report on his

testimony managed to not even mention the NASA scientist's criticisms of the oil industry.

House Democrats greeted Hansen's testimony with patronizing condescension. Predictably they chose to ignore his call for the prosecution of energy company executives, who annually pour millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of both parties.

Since Hansen issued his first warning in 1988, the US, which is responsible for about one-quarter of the world's greenhouse gas production, has done nothing to limit carbon emissions. The Bush administration, in alliance with the oil industry, has sought to play down the scientific evidence in support of global warming.

Last year Hansen testified before another congressional committee about Bush administration interference in climate research, recounting instances of government suppression of data related to global warming. In one case a staff member was told he could not issue a press release on research showing that the ocean was less efficient in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than originally estimated.

In 2005, after Hansen presented climate data to the American Geophysical Union, the NASA public affairs office issued tighter regulations, stipulating that media interviews had to be pre-approved and that Hansen had to get prior permission before posting anything on the GISS website.

Other government scientists have reported similar attempts by the Bush administration to muzzle data on global warming. Documents support the claims of scientists that the White House made deliberate attempts to mislead the public about the dangers posed by climate change by editing official reports.

Oil company representatives have been given positions on federal environmental policy councils and climate information oversight. The White House appointed Phil Cooney, a former lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute, to head the Council of Environmental Quality. In that position he edited government climate reports in order to spread false doubt and uncertainty on the subject of global warming. After his activities were exposed, Clooney left his government post for a position with Exxon Mobil.

The attempts by Exxon Mobil to discredit the scientific understanding about climate change on the basis of pseudoscience are well documented. A conservative think tank sponsored by Exxon Mobil

offered scientists \$10,000 to write articles critical of official studies on climate change. The world's largest private energy company has spent millions of dollars to spread false and misleading information about the dangers of global warming.

According to a report issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists in January 2007, Exxon Mobil gave nearly \$16 million between 1998 and 2005 to front organizations set up to provide a platform for "global warming skeptics." In many cases these individuals are directly on the payroll of Exxon Mobil funded groups.

Despite Hansen's compelling testimony, there are no indications that US policy will change. Since Hansen first appeared before Congress in 1988, neither the Clinton administration nor the administrations of George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush have passed any major legislation restricting greenhouse gas emissions. There have been 21 coal-fired power plants constructed and US emissions of carbon dioxide have risen by some 18 percent.

The domination of the energy sector by a handful of private monopolies and the subordination of both the Republicans and Democrats to these powerful interests blocks the adoption of any serious measures to deal with the looming catastrophe posed by global warming. These multibillion dollar corporations will not tolerate any measure, no matter how critical for human survival, that impinges on their profits.

Further, any strategy to oppose global warming requires a coordinated international effort. However, energy companies dominate US foreign policy as well, dictating a strategy that seeks to secure world hegemony, including the invasion and occupation of Iraq and other oil rich regions of the world.



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