

July 28, 2003

Dear Colleague,

The Republican Policy Committee (RPC) recently issued a paper entitled, "The Shaky Science Behind the Climate Change Sense of the Congress Resolution." The RPC paper was reportedly in response to a Sense of the Congress Resolution on climate change included in the State Department Authorization bill (S. 925, Calendar No. 77). As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, I am writing to respond to the report and offer some needed clarifications.

I am concerned that the RPC paper does not provide an objective review of the current state of climate change science nor of the projected costs of climate change policies. There have been a number of reports on a wide range of issues surrounding the scientific basis for climate change. For example, in June 2001, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) issued a report entitled, "Climate Change Science: An Analysis of Some Key Questions." The report was requested by the President to help inform the Administration's ongoing review of U.S. climate change policy. The NAS report summary states:

"Greenhouse gases are accumulating in the Earth's atmosphere as a result of human activities, causing surface air temperatures and subsurface ocean temperatures to rise. Temperatures are, in fact, rising. The changes observed over the last several decades are likely mostly due to human activities, but we cannot rule out that some significant part of these changes is also a reflection of natural variability. Human-induced warming and associated sea level rise are expected to continue through the 21st century."

There is indeed widespread consensus on climate change, such as was expressed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report issued in 2001, which was called into question in the RPC paper. In testimony before the Commerce Committee on May 17, 2000, Dr. Robert Watson, then Chairman of the IPCC, stated that, "The overwhelming majority of scientific experts recognize that scientific uncertainties exist, but still believe that human-induced climate change is inevitable." Contrary to the RPC document, there is no new evidence to contradict the IPCC findings in any substantive way. Rather, there is new evidence to further substantiate the IPCC findings, such as a new analysis of the so-called satellite record of temperatures that shows warming comparable to that of the so-called surface record, and additional studies that attribute 20th century climate change to human emissions of greenhouse gases.

The RPC paper relies upon statements made by Dr. Richard Lindzen at a Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee hearing, but ignores the comments made by other witnesses, specifically those of Dr. Kevin Trenberth, who appeared at the same hearing and has a different perspective on the state of climate change science. Specifically, the RPC paper refers to Dr. Lindzen's views on the NAS report, mentioned above, which he helped to prepare. It should be pointed out that if Dr. Lindzen was so strongly opposed to the report findings, he could have exercised his options to offer dissenting views to the final report as allowed for under NAS policy and guidelines. He did not.

Further, despite the statements in the RPC paper, the IPCC report does not make predictions, and is careful to make projections that are tied to particular emissions scenarios. These scenarios are the result of much discussion and analysis and are defined in great detail to cover the broad range of possible outcomes which can be interpreted for policy purposes. As such, the statements included in the RPC document are at odds with the reality of how the IPCC operates.

I also am concerned about the RPC's statements on the impact of climate change on the economy and question its economic assumptions. Indeed, the U.S. can take many actions to address climate change without harming the economy, provided such actions are carried out in the right way and according to an appropriate timetable. While there would be costs associated with efforts to address climate change, there also are major cost implications if no actions are taken.

The effect of any action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on future climate change depends on time scale. Indeed, the effects of climate change policies on climate change would be small for many decades because carbon dioxide has a long lifetime, and so the near term impacts of climate change depend on those emissions that have already been released. However, unless appropriate action is taken now, carbon dioxide emissions will only continue to accumulate, and further increase the negative impacts of climate change.

Attached is a detailed explanation (Attachment A) of concerns over allegations made in the RPC paper, along with a letter (Attachment B) from Dr. Tom Wigley, Sr. Scientist of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, alerting me to the misrepresentations of his work in the RPC paper. I hope you will consider this information as the Senate works to implement meaningful climate change legislation.

Sincerely,

John McCain
Chairman

Attachments