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Wildlife Triggers Change in Congressional Debate on Climate

ADRIENNE FROELICH SPONBERG

The 110th Congress is taking a new approach to climate change. Rather than debating whether or not climate change is a "hoax," the Democratic-majority Congress is moving full steam ahead. With the creation of a select House committee on climate change and a number of committees holding hearings and debating legislation, lawmakers are now discussing the possible consequences of climate change for, among other things, ecosystems and wildlife.

The impacts of climate change on wildlife are pulling more policymakers into the debate. Senator John Warner (R–VA) admits that his love of hunting and fishing sparked his interest in climate change. At a recent Environment and Public Works (EPW) subcommittee hearing on the link between climate change and wildlife, Warner noted, "The wildlife and the plant species are not represented by any lobbyists. And how they react to today's climate is a pure, clear science and it could well provide the benchmarks, the early indicators, of what direction that our nation must move to solve this problem."

Warner isn't the only sportsman turning his eye toward climate change. In a recent survey of licensed hunters and anglers conducted by the National Wildlife Federation, 76 percent of respondents said they believe global warming is occurring. More than 70 percent of sportsmen believe that climate change is a serious threat to wildlife and affects, or will affect, hunting and fishing conditions. Even more—80 percent—said that America should be a world leader in addressing the issue of global climate change. "We are reaching a tipping point in this country where the vital sportsmen's constituency is adding its voice to those who recognize global warming is occurring, that it poses serious threats and that action must be taken to address it," said Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation.

However, Senator James Inhofe (R–OK), former chair and current ranking member of the EPW committee, believes that the link between climate change and wildlife is tenuous. In his opening remarks for a hearing on the topic, Inhofe stated, "The fact is that the relationship between species and climate is not clearly understood." He added, "It is clear the environmentalists are seeking to use Americans' love of wildlife as a way to bring about climate change policies they cannot get on the science alone."

Thomas Lovejoy, director of the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, believes the science is there: "The data have moved from the anecdotal to the statistically significant, and they demonstrate unequivocally that nature is on the move." Nadine Lymn, public affairs director at the Ecological Society of America, says Inhofe's skepticism on the relationship between climate and species is unfounded. "If the senator had taken a moment to survey the scientific, peer-reviewed literature, he would have discovered numerous studies demonstrating clear linkages between climate and species, from population declines to disruptive effects in marine food webs."

The challenge now confronting scientists is predicting responses to an uncertain future climate. "The important issue before us is not the stirrings we can already document but the changes that further climate change is likely to engender," Lovejoy told the EPW committee. Margaret Palmer, coauthor of the 2004 report *Ecosystems and Climate Change: Research Priorities for the U.S. Climate Change Science Program,* prepared for the Ecosystems Interagency Working Group, believes scientists are up to the challenge. "Once funding is enhanced, ongoing and future research will lead to important information for policymakers rather quickly, in less than a decade." Scientists need not conduct thousands of site-specific experiments, either. "As long as the research reveals the trends and elucidates the underlying ecological mechanisms, then we are in position to suggest ways to deal with the impacts."

However, the research to provide those answers relies largely on federal funding, and those dollars are becoming harder to obtain. The Climate Change Science Program is slated for a 7.4 percent cut in fiscal year (FY) 2008, the fourth year in a row that funding for the program has declined. Within that total, funding for the "ecosystem research element" has declined at an even greater pace, dropping 10.3 percent between FY 2005 and FY 2007. Earlier this year, Alan Leshner, chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, told congressional appropriators that the current slide in climate change research funding needs to be reversed, saying that "a continuing decline is, I believe, a path to disaster."

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