

Does NASA's James Hansen Still Matter in Climate Debate?

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Published: July 14, 2009

When NASA climatologist James Hansen testified to Congress in 1988 about the dangers of global warming, his words became a rallying cry for environmentalists and politicians determined to control heat-trapping gases.

When Hansen, the director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, showed up at a briefing on Capitol Hill yesterday, it was with little fanfare and minus the presence of national television networks.

The man termed "the father of global warming" has irked many longtime supporters with his scathing attacks against President Obama's plan for a cap-and-trade system. Now, a leading Republican climate skeptic is considering calling Hansen as a witness at upcoming Senate hearings. A House Democrat, meanwhile, labeled Hansen's Capitol Hill appearance yesterday "irrelevant." With landmark climate legislation heading to the Senate after passage in the House last month, the friction surrounding Hansen raises questions about what role, if any, the Iowa-born scientist will play in the upcoming debate.

"He's losing some of his political luster with Democrats," said Kenneth Green, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. "When he goes off the reservation and makes loopy comments, they probably cringe and hope no one will see them."

Hansen, for his part, said he believes "some Democrats deserve to be criticized." Speaking in a room in the Capitol Visitor Center, Hansen repeated his unwavering support for a carbon tax as the only way to lead the United States and the world out of a climate catastrophe. The House-passed bill sponsored by Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Edward Markey (D-Mass.) is riddled with too many giveaways to the coal industry, he said.

"I'm connecting the dots between the science and the policy. If I don't do that, then the special interests do it and they screw it up," Hansen said. Sponsored by Friends of the Earth -- one of the few environmental groups publicly critical of the Waxman-Markey bill -- the briefing drew about 100 people, including Senate staffers. It featured carbon tax supporters like Robert Shapiro, a former Clinton undersecretary of Commerce.

After the talk, a handful of admirers swarmed around Hansen, while one tried to hawk a product to sell to NASA.

Under attack from the left and right

The House bill, which is supported by much of the Democratic leadership, backs the cap-and-trade concept. Instead of a tax, it places an overall ceiling on greenhouse gas output and requires businesses to buy and sell carbon allowances in a marketplace to meet their emission cuts.

In a just-published [piece](#) in the Huffington Post, Hansen called the House legislation a "Ponzi-like" scheme and outlined its "egregious flaws" in bullet-point form. Those deficiencies, in his view, include an over-reliance on carbon offsets, which allow emitters to meet emission cuts by buying credits outside their own factories.

He also thinks there needs to be greater research and deployment of nuclear power, because that's the only way to "get China and India off coal."

Hansen's backers argue that politicians ignore his political suggestions at their own peril. They say Hansen's science was attacked for years only to be proved right, and that the same is true with his legislative suggestions.

"Mr. Hansen certainly proved ahead of his time with his modeling of global climate change. Is [he] also ahead of his time with his call for a carbon tax?" [wrote](#) one blogger at the *Wall Street Journal*.

Yet some worry that the climate scientist is being used as a political attack tool by conservatives who don't even believe in his computer models.

"The right wing loves what he's doing," said Joseph Romm, a senior fellow for the Center for American Progress, a think tank with ties to the Obama administration.

Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), who once called global warming a "hoax," recently cited Hansen's criticisms of the House legislation. During the House floor debate, some GOP members voting against the bill mentioned Hansen.

Despite policy differences, still educating people on the science

The bigger question could be whether Hansen gets much attention at all in coming months. Some claim he is becoming a sideshow because of activities like his arrest last week with actress Daryl Hannah and others at a West Virginia coal protest. That incident could land Hansen in jail for a year.

Others say that Hansen's name recognition is high enough that he's bound to influence the current debate, even at a small scale. The result could be that Americans simply learn more about the science behind global warming, despite the different policy prescriptions floating around.

Hansen wouldn't have made it onto the Huffington Post without being political, noted Tom Bowman, the president of the consulting firm Bowman Global Change.

The public still widely misunderstands the causes and risks of warming temperatures, he said, so in the long run, Hansen may do a lot of good by taking a policy stance. The Huffington Post

piece, for example, gave extensive technical details about the current concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and why Hansen considers the Earth near a dangerous tipping point.

"You could say his efforts to speak directly about policy is a way to talk to about the science," Bowman said.

Inhofe may call Hansen to testify

Hansen surged onto the political radar decades ago when he jumped ahead of many scientists in describing the impact of rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Prior to his investigation, little empirical data existed connecting CO₂ and temperature rise. Using new computer models, he predicted that the 1980s and 1990s would be untypically warm, a forecast that turned out to be eerily accurate.

His 1988 Senate testimony that global warming was already occurring garnered widespread media coverage and gained the support of Democrats opposed to Republican environmental policies, in particular.

During the Bush administration, Democrats like Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) called for public hearings in front of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to investigate allegations that Hansen's climate findings were being censored by Republicans.

As the political balance stands now, there's a chance that Inhofe, the ranking Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, will call Hansen as a witness, according to Inhofe spokesman Matt Dempsey.

"After all, if the most vocal man warning of man-made climate fears is completely rejecting the chosen congressional 'solution,' that makes a very powerful argument against the bill," said Marc Morano, a former Inhofe staff member who now runs a skeptic Web site called Climate Depot.

"I do think [Hansen] can be used against the effort he has worked so hard his entire career to call attention to," said Chelsea Maxwell, a former Republican adviser to Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), who tried to push a climate bill through Congress before his retirement.

Boxer spokesman Peter Rafle did not respond to a request for comment, but Hansen said yesterday that he had not been called to testify at any upcoming hearings. He last testified in front of Congress at a House Ways and Means Committee hearing on Feb. 25. He never heard back from the White House after composing a letter to President Obama about climate change, he said.

'What is he thinking?'

Last week, House Democrats who supported the bill appeared less than enthusiastic about Hansen's recent advocacy.

Asked whether Hansen wields influence, House Science and Technology Committee Chairman Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.) said, "I think he has an opinion."

Rep Rick Boucher (D-Va.), who was a key player in the passage of the House bill, called Hansen's appearance on the Hill "irrelevant," adding, "the debate about the science is over."

Markey said Hansen held "moral influence." But, said the co-author of the House cap-and-trade bill, a carbon tax simply cannot win enough votes to make it through both chambers of Congress.

Meanwhile, long-term backers of Hansen's science are shouting down his political arguments. Romm, who said Hansen inspired him to write a book, wrote a series of blog postings criticizing the scientist's policy suggestions in detail. He said he had no concern that Hansen might be right about the carbon tax in the same way he was right in making early scientific predictions, because the two are incomparable issues.

"The kind of certainty you have in science you never have in politics," Romm said.

Similarly, Eileen Claussen, the president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, said she wished Hansen would stay out of the politics business.

"What is he thinking?" she asked after reading the Huffington Post article. "Who does he think will vote for this?"

Hansen says he's just calling it as he sees it

Yesterday, Hansen said he doesn't feel abandoned by those who promoted his scientific findings but dislike his policy recommendations.

"I can't control what these guys say. You just have to say what you think is right," he said.

He did have harsh words, however, for Inhofe and other Republicans who don't believe in his science but are using his words to slam legislation. They "repeat a lie" or take a comment out of context, he said.

He said he had little choice but to speak out, since few other people could explain links between politics and complex climate models. The Waxman-Markey plan doesn't guarantee that coal will be phased out or cleaned up, in his view, since there's no guarantee that technology to capture the greenhouse gas from fossil-fuel plants will become commercially viable.

"The policies have to be consistent with the geophysical facts. And that requires quite a rapid phase-out of coal emissions," he said. "Otherwise, we're toast."

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