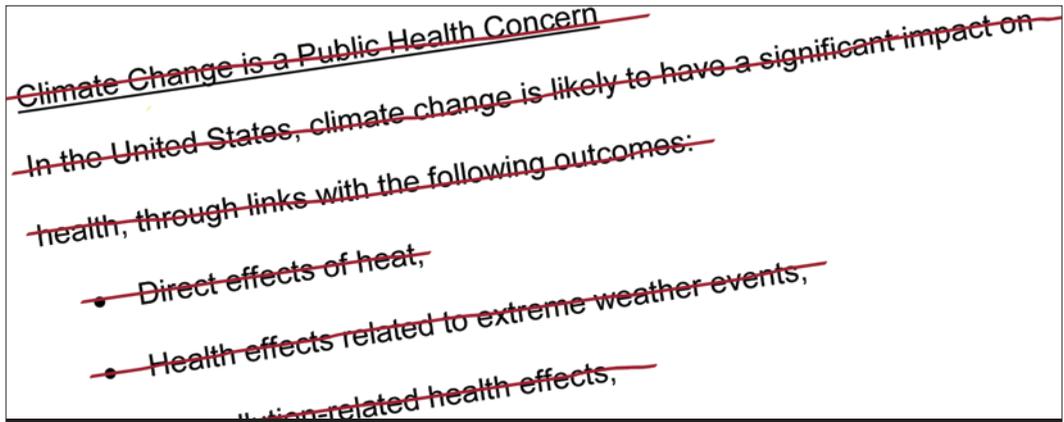


GLOBAL WARMING



The Heat is On

Editing of CDC Testimony Backfires

By Michael Stebbins

A DAY AFTER HER APPEARANCE at a Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works hearing late last year on “Examining the Human Health Impacts of Global Warming,” the director of the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Julie Gerberding, expressed deep frustration. The source of her frustration, however, was not (as most expected) the White House Office of Management and Budget for cutting half of the original testimony they received for approval. It was the journalists who reported on the massive redactions.

“I expected the press to write a lot of stories about the effects of climate change on human health and what CDC was doing about it,” said Dr. Gerberding at an Atlanta Press Club luncheon. “But instead I had to read that someone had edited my testimony. I mean this is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

Indeed, Dr. Gerberding is correct. The stories should have been about the potential for diseases spreading to new regions, the likely health implications of heat waves and drought as well as discussion of our most vulnerable citizens. And it is probably true that, as she put it, many in the press probably “don’t really understand how written testimony occurs.”

The Office of Management and Budget, of course, has every right to “try to coordinate the testimony from the administration and try to make sure that enthusiastic program directors are not trying to advocate for more money coming to their agency,” she explained. But Puh-Lease, Dr. Gerberding, that doesn’t make the edits made by OMB any less interesting or make them any less a news story.

In fact, the kerfuffle over the edits kept the issue in the news far longer than if the version of her testi-

mony submitted to OMB had not been leaked to the press. The reason: The Bush administration's long track record of manipulating the science that is generated by the federal government.

Dr. Gerberding is well aware of the fact that this administration has engaged in systematic denial, redaction, stalling, and obfuscation of science findings when they don't support their ideologically driven policies, for global warming science in particular. Further, it was White House Press Secretary Dana Perino's laughable response to questions posed by the press that chummed the waters.

MY DOG ATE IT

After initially denying that the White House had watered down Dr. Gerberding's testimony, Perino changed tack and attacked the science. Employing classic obfuscation techniques, Perino implied that the sections of Dr. Gerberding's testimony that were removed "didn't align with the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]" findings—you know, the people who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore.

After a ladle full of those wacky science findings, Perino had almost sealed it for those supposedly lazy reporters. But then she stumbled on her punchline. "And so the decision on behalf of CDC was to focus that testimony on public health benefits—there are public health benefits to climate change."

Public health *benefits* to climate change?

To her credit, Dr. Gerberding did not focus on the "health benefits" of global warming in her oral testimony. And not surprisingly, reporters looked at the latest IPCC report and called Dr. Jonathan Patz from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who was the lead author on three separate IPCC reports, to figure out if such discrepancies exist. Dr. Patz's response to the edits was in direct conflict with the White House's take, stating to the *The Washington Post*, "That's nonsense... Dr. Gerberding's testimony was scientifically accurate and absolutely in line with the findings of the IPCC."

Other equally qualified scientists, including Dr. Linda Rosenstock, dean of the University of California, Los Angeles School of Public Health had a similar take. Dr. Rosenstock clearly understands how public testimony occurs: "In the politicization of this topic—the science wasn't changed, it was deleted."

So who were the scientists that told the administration that Dr. Gerberding's testimony was at odds with the IPCC report? The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, led by Dr. John Marburger, soon piped up to take some of the credit.

Spokeswoman Kristin Scuderi told *The Washington Post* in an e-mail that Dr. Marburger brought up the "inconsistencies in the use of language between the [IPCC] report and the testimony" and that "the OMB editor decided to transmit a version that simply struck the first eight pages." Consequently, a description of the current activities of the CDC focused on the most severe health consequences of global warming fell victim to the delete key of an OMB staffer who was likely unable to sift through the testimony and the IPCC report and make a determination.

MY BAD?

The White House owes the public (as well as Senator Boxer (D-CA), who chairs the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and called Dr. Gerberding to testify before her committee) an explanation, and not just for this incident. The nation is in sore need of a *mea culpa* for the systematic censorship of climate science that has fueled the politicalization of this issue and slowed true reform of U.S. energy policy. But such contrition has not been a hallmark of this administration, and to our detriment there is little evidence that it will ever back progressive climate preservation legislation.

The current incident has not occurred in a bubble. It is news because of a pattern of behavior, not because of a single incident of heavy-handed editing of congressional testimony. There are just too many incidents to ignore, among them:

- A political lackey who neglected to graduate from college censoring NASA scientists
- The harassing reins put on NASA scientist Dr. James Hansen
- The subtle but significant removal of “to understand and protect our home planet” from NASA’s mission statement
- The failure of the Environmental Protection Agency to rule on California’s request of a waiver from the Clean Air Act so they can enact a law passed two years ago to decrease greenhouse gas emissions
- The revision of news releases from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to downplay the impact of climate change
- The litmus tests for critical climate science advisory panels
- Barring U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials from speaking on or responding to issues relating to climate change, polar bears, or sea ice when traveling abroad.

In each of these cases, there is considerable question of whether the best interests of the country were the first priority.

In the case of Dr. Gerberding’s testimony, it is at least possible that there just wasn’t enough time for the Office of Science and Technology Policy and OMB to figure it out. As it turns out, they probably made a mistake. In the end, Dr. Gerberding did a fine job testifying and stated that she did not feel encumbered in her oral testimony, but her satisfaction isn’t what is in question.

What is in question is whether Congress is being given the full story by the administration. Removing significant details on the full impact of global climate change is not acceptable if it was done for the wrong reason.

Congress at the time was considering over half a dozen bills for curbing greenhouse gases, including reducing emissions by raising CAFE auto emission standards. And don’t forget that the committee hearing with Dr. Gerberding was in prelude to a committee vote on a carbon cap-and-trade bill that Sens. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and John Warner (R-VA) introduced. The bill is controversial but would also be the largest step toward controlling greenhouse gas emissions that the United States has taken to date. That bill, which will be debated on the Senate floor in June, and others before Congress are directly at odds with the Bush administration’s voluntary greenhouse gas reduction policies.

Blaming the press for not covering the climate change issue well enough would have been fair five years ago, but the reporting has improved and is more focused than ever on measures to slow the consequences of global climate change. If the administration takes a few hits in the media for overzealous editing so the message stays in the public view a little longer, then maybe in some small way it will make up for some of the inaction on reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

The Bush administration made its bed by censoring Dr. Gerberding’s testimony and continually undermining efforts to understand, potentially slow, and prepare for the consequences of global climate change. The press is just fluffing up the pillows. *sp*

Michael Stebbins is with the Federation of American Scientists and Scientists and Engineers for America. He is the author of Sex, Drugs and DNA: Science’s Taboos Confronted. The opinions expressed in this column are his own.