Policy Update: House Climate Change Champions Host Briefing on Climate Science

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On November 14, Rep. Ed Markey (D-MA), Ranking Member of the House Natural Resources Committee, and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), Ranking Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, hosted a Congressional briefing entitled, “Undeniable Data: The Latest Research on Global Temperature and Climate Science.” The purpose of the event was to shed light on some of the criticism made by climate change skeptics and to highlight the work of climate scientists in an effort to dispel misunderstanding among Members of Congress. Reps. Markey and Waxman, who you’ll recall crafted comprehensive cap and trade legislation a few years ago that successfully passed the House but fizzled out in the Senate, were the only Members in attendance.

As Rep. Markey stated in his opening remarks, the halls of Congress have not seen much talk on climate change recently, especially when compared to action taken by past congresses. Climate scientists have largely been left out of the debate, except when their science is being attacked in political discussions. Rep. Markey called these recent attacks on science, including on the GOP campaign trail, a “colossal distraction.” Despite the various reports by federal agencies, the National Academies, and international organizations that find the climate is warming, Rep. Markey continued, politicians still have doubts about the science. Rep. Waxman added that his requests that a hearing be scheduled by the Energy and Commerce Committee to discuss Members’ questions regarding climate science went unanswered, adding that the current Congress has taken major steps backwards with respect to action on climate change.

The featured speaker at the briefing was Richard Muller, Director of the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Project. Dr. Muller was invited to present the findings of the two year project he led that concluded that global land surface temperature is in fact increasing and rose by 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit over the last 60 years. His study confirmed research conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the U.K. Met Office. Most notable about the study, however, is that it was partially financed by the Koch Foundation, which is known for its denial of climate change. In the study, Dr. Muller and his team addressed four common biases among climate skeptics: (1) station warming bias, (2) urban heat islands (that is, the validity of urban versus rural weather stations), (3) data adjustment bias (that is, adjustments to data made by hand), and (4) station selection bias. His conclusions were that there are no biases in the data related to urban heat islands, data selection, station quality—which was Muller’s greatest concern—or data adjustments. Prior to the start of this study two years ago, Dr. Muller admitted that he was a major skeptic about the climate changing.

When asked what he would like to communicate to other skeptics about his study, Dr. Muller responded that he hopes they will review the study and come to agree that climate change is happening. However,
he added questions still remain about the extent to which the changes are attributable to human influence. He did not deny that humans have contributed, but questions how much.

The other panelists, Ben Santer, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and William Chameides, Dean of Duke University’s Nicholas School of the Environment and Vice Chair of the National Academies’ Committee on America’s Climate Choices, disagreed with Muller’s take on human contributions to climate change stating that natural causation alone cannot explain all of the observed changes in temperature. Dr. Chameides also noted that scientists have an imperfect ability to predict the future, but urged that this should not serve as an excuse for not acting.

Rep. Markey stated his intention to continue to allow the science to be heard in these debates.