

Climate Scientists Cautiously Hopeful After a Day of Congressional Visits

Amy Maxmen

AAAS

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When climate scientists fanned out through the Capitol recently for a series of meetings with new members of Congress, they had a strategy that departed sharply from past practice: They didn't urge policy-makers to support climate change legislation, and they dropped debates about mediating man-made climate change. Instead, they focused on coastline erosion, agricultural pests, and other issues where the representatives' concerns and their own were likely to overlap.

The approach was unconventional and the outcome was mixed, but they created some new relationships and opened new lines of communication. A meeting with Justin Spickard, a legislative aide to Senator Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), was in some ways typical. "We traditionally stay away from the debate about climate change because we don't know if it's man-made, but at the end of the day we also want good policies that help us grow the economy," Spickard said. At the end of the meeting, he told his guests: "We appreciate what ya'll do and we'll reach out to you folks in the future."

This was the sort of engagement that marked a success for the first official "Climate Science Day," an event organized by AAAS and 10 other science groups that overlapped with the first day of the AAAS Annual Meeting on 17 February. Climate specialists from an array of disciplines flew in from around the nation to take part.

Organizer Kasey White, a project director at the AAAS Center for Science, Technology, and Congress, says her goal was to connect policy-makers with scientists. To this end, the 35 scientists had an afternoon of training in how Congress works. The next day, they paired off to meet with members of Congress and aides representing 22 states.

Rob Young, a professor specializing in coastal geology at Western Carolina University, joined with his colleagues in tailoring talks to address issues specific to each congressional district: costly erosion on beaches in Florida; childhood asthma in North Carolina caused by coal-fired power plants outside the state; agricultural pests in Tennessee; sustainability of the ski industry in Colorado; and hurricane remediation in Louisiana. Young opened his meetings by drawing the connection between climate and the economy: "No matter who's causing climate change," he said, "we need to prepare for the economic impact."

Scientific evidence solidly supports man-made global warming, of course, but the political reality is that many Americans and their elected representatives have had persistent doubts about climate change and other environmental issues. Just days before "Climate Science Day," Republicans in the House of Representatives proposed drastic reductions to federal funding for conservation and research on energy in the continuing resolution for the remainder of FY2011. They proposed to slash the Environmental

Protection Agency budget by \$3 billion, which is 29% below what it was in FY2010. And they recently voted to prohibit funding to implement regulations designed to address climate change, including the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that the EPA can regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act.

The question for the climate scientists, and for the broader science community, is how to engage effectively in such a political environment. Scientists and scientific organizations at "Climate Science Day" tried to at least ease relationships between scientists and politicians—relationships strained during unsuccessful efforts to curb oil-drilling, for example, or to limit emissions from industrial power plants.

Microbial ecologist Rachel Gallery from the National Ecological Observatory Network Inc. (NEON) stressed that her organization had no policy to push, but instead, takes an unbiased pulse of ecosystems in the United States like a doctor measuring the health of a patient. She told staff for Colorado representatives that NEON would welcome the chance to provide them with information on outbreaks of destructive mountain pine beetle or changing land use.

At the start of one meeting, Manuel Lerdau, a plant physiologist at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, admitted there is uncertainty in climate science. Although the climate is warming, he says, the rate of future warming and timing of its effects—for example, a submerged Miami—can't be predicted exactly. That acknowledgement was met with a smile and nod from Chris Davis, a legislative assistant to first-term U.S. Representative Stephen Fincher (R-Tennessee). "I think we can work with you," Davis told the scientists.

The ensuing discussion focused on farmers facing environmental variability and the effect of pollution on cotton farms. Davis voiced the interest of his district in the potential of biofuels or biodiesel to lower the cost of industrial farming and product shipment.

"The most important thing I gleaned from staffers is that they recognize we have overlapping goals," Lerdau says. "We all want to improve food security, energy security, and environmental resilience in general. These things help combat climate change too."

However, not all meetings were so collegial. In some cases, staffers and representatives stared blankly as the scientists spoke, or were noticeably distracted, eyeing CNN buzzing on the nearby television or changing the subject to college football or gardening.

Some Democrats told the scientists they ought to be more vocal in politics and less compromising in the push for policy changes. But after the day's meetings, Josh Willis, an oceanographer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, said although impassioned speeches may reach more people in the general public, that doesn't seem to change minds on Capitol Hill. Willis said more than one Republican staffer told him they were disdainful of politically charged climate scientists.

Certainly, there is disagreement about how to convince skeptics about the dangers of global warming. Representative Heath Shuler (D-North Carolina), said he was “on board” with the scientists’ environmental concerns. He said he tells constituents to look at climate change investments as insurance policies, whether or not they think the earth is warming.

Lerdau did not meet with Shuler, but he’s familiar with the insurance policy comparison. While it might be persuasive, he said, it clouds an important economic point

“It implicitly accepts the assumption that there is an economic cost to reacting to climate change, like the cost of paying \$100 per month for a home insurance policy when your home never burns down,” Lardeau says. “But there isn’t a long-term cost to handling climate change. In fact it will enhance the economy by providing us with sustainability, no matter what the cause of climate change is.”

While the challenges are clear, the mood after the visits was largely positive as the scientists met up for happy hour at The Dubliner, an Irish pub around the corner from the Capitol. They agreed the day went better than they had expected, given the prevailing sentiments among many policymakers. Some meetings with staunch skeptics concluded with promises to share information and to keep an open line of communication.

In Young’s view, that was good news. “Success,” he said, “from my point of view, will really just be an email asking about coastline erosion—anything to bridge the gap.”