

Comments on House Joint Resolution 12 (Climate Change)

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I'm not the sort of person most people would expect to see at something like this. I'm a geochemistry professor at Brigham Young University, but I'm also a county delegate in the local Republican Party. I'm a pretty conservative guy, so when some members of the Utah Legislature say they want to "send a message to Washington" saying to keep out of our business, I can often go right along with that. When they want to send a message that overzealous regulation could put many farms and other companies out of business, exacerbating an already poor economic situation, I can sympathize. But from my perspective, the problem with House Joint Resolution 12 is that, if passed, it will send a number of other messages to Washington that nobody intended. The main message it will send is, "Don't bother considering our concerns, because we are not willing to participate in an authentic discussion about this topic."

When I first read the bill, I wrote a letter to the Legislature outlining why I thought HJR 12 should be tabled, and got 14 other scientists at BYU to sign it. We don't object to the resolution because we all support EPA regulation of carbon dioxide. Some of us do, but I personally don't think it's a good idea at this point. The main thing with which we take issue as a group is that the bill includes a number of factual errors, misconceptions, and contradictions. For example, we pointed out how HJR 12 accuses researchers at the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia of falsifying their global temperature data, but then it goes on to *misuse* that very dataset to claim the Earth has been cooling for the past 12 years. We pointed out that HJR 12 implies that *both* chlorofluorocarbons *and* natural processes are the dominant factors governing recent climate change. When we pointed out these contradictions, the response from Rep. Gibson and other supporters of the bill was...well, nothing. What message will it send to Washington if our Legislators aren't even willing to do some basic fact checking and correct obvious errors in their claims?

Now contrast this with the recent behavior of scientists who, when confronted with a handful of errors in the most recent IPCC report, have openly admitted that these are mistakes that should not have been included. That's how reasonable people behave. They listen to what others have to say. They admit mistakes—especially the obvious ones—and try to correct them.

What's really disheartening about HJR 12 is how blatantly anti-intellectual and anti-scientist it is. It accuses the East Anglia climate researchers of falsifying their temperature dataset based on an out-of-context statement from a stolen e-mail. In context, it is clear that these scientists were talking about no such thing. But then HJR 12 goes on to accuse thousands of other scientists of essentially being willing to support any position in exchange for research money. It's true that it takes money to do research, but I have to say that the scientists I know are not willing to say whatever government officials want to hear just to get federal research money. The scientists I know certainly didn't pursue this career path for the money. What

message will it send to Washington if our Legislature is willing to accuse so many people of wrongdoing on the basis of so little evidence?

The fact is that those who have tried to closely follow the evidence for human influence on climate have almost uniformly concluded that it is a credible threat. Of course there are a few who disagree, but there always will be with respect to any complex question like this. Science will never bring absolute certainty about such complex questions, but by now I think science has built up a good enough track record to be afforded a careful hearing. What message will it send if our Legislature is willing to summarily dismiss the findings of the vast majority of climate scientists and specialists in related fields over several decades, in favor of a tiny minority?

Even though the House amended HJR 12 to remove multiple instances of the word “conspiracy” from the bill, the main supporters of the bill have gone on record stating that they think climate science is part of an enormous conspiracy. Removing these words may have made the text sound slightly more polite, but the intent is still clear. And so I ask our legislators, “Is this really the message you want to send—that your politics are driven by conspiracy theories?”

I agree with the scientific consensus that humans are significantly affecting the Earth’s climate, and I think something needs to be done about greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, I think the concerns supporters of HJR 12 voice about the effects excessive regulation would have on food production prices and other aspects of the economy are valid. As we try to decide what to do about climate change, these concerns need to be considered, but make no mistake—doing nothing about climate change is a very risky option at this point. I believe our Legislature needs to send a message that they are trying to think of viable solutions to the problem, and making sure the concerns of their constituents are heard. But I’m afraid that if the Legislature passes HJR 12, they will unwittingly be encouraging others to ignore their constituents’ concerns.