

Speaker, Republicans clash in global warming hearing GOP member insists Pelosi take questions about her plans

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(02-09) 04:00 PDT Washington -- House Speaker Nancy Pelosi used the bully pulpit of her new position Thursday to pressure fellow lawmakers to get legislation to combat global warming ready for a vote this summer.

In a highly unusual move for a speaker, the San Francisco Democrat appeared as a witness before the House Science and Technology Committee along with scientists who co-wrote the new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which warns of dire consequences if the world does not rein in greenhouse gases.

"We hold our children's future in our hands -- not just our grandchildren or great-grandchildren, but our own children," Pelosi told lawmakers. "As the most adaptable creatures on the planet, it is time for us to adapt."

Pelosi's testimony -- combined with her recent creation of a new House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming -- reflects a deliberate strategy to elevate the issue in Congress this year and press her own Democratic committee chairmen to act quickly.

The speaker said she wants all committees to finish work on their legislation by early June, so the House can vote on an energy independence and climate change package by July 4.

But Republicans made clear to Pelosi that they will try to block her effort to steamroller a bill through Congress, which they warn could raise energy costs and harm the U.S. economy.

"We can't figure out how to write a cap-and-trade bill that does not cause an immediate spike in natural gas prices," said Ralph Hall of Texas, the ranking Republican on the committee, referring to limits on greenhouse gas emissions. "Factories won't compete with utilities to buy gas. Rather, they will move to India and China, where there are no pollution controls, inevitably worsening global emissions."

Pelosi sharply disagreed, noting that many European nations are already implementing carbon limits without damaging their economies.

"Restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions will drive these technologies into the marketplace

quickly and cost-effectively, while simultaneously creating the next generation of good-paying new jobs," she said.

Pelosi's appearance sparked a small fight in the committee when Republican James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin objected to her appearing as a witness without taking questions from lawmakers. Pelosi had agreed to make opening remarks, but due to her tight schedule had not agreed to questions.

"It is mandatory," Sensenbrenner insisted, citing House rules. "I just want to see the rules followed."

Democrats objected, criticizing Republicans for failing to extend a courtesy often made to lawmakers who testify. "I'm very disappointed and very surprised," said Jerry Costello, D-Ill.

After Pelosi took several questions, a Republican, Dana Rohrabacher of Huntington Beach (Orange County), apologized for the surprise grilling.

"We should pay her the same respect we paid to Newt Gingrich," Rohrabacher said.

But the questions elicited some captivating exchanges between Pelosi and top Republicans.

"What are you planning to do, Madam Speaker, to make sure that we don't legislate in this area in a way that wrecks the American economy and costs our workers jobs?" Sensenbrenner asked.

Pelosi said lawmakers should consider the impacts of carbon limits on the coal industry, electric utilities and other businesses.

"But we also can't ignore the consequences of not doing something, because that will have an economic impact as well," she said.

Pelosi surprised some lawmakers by saying she was open to nuclear energy, which emits no greenhouse gases, as one solution to climate change -- although she still expressed concerns about disposing of the waste.

"In the early days of my life in Congress, I was an opponent of nuclear energy," she said. "The technology has changed and I bring a more open mind to that subject now."

The committee also heard testimony from leading U.S. scientists who were co-authors of a new global assessment of climate change. The report warned that even if emissions are reduced, past and future greenhouse gases will continue to heat the planet and raise sea levels for more than 1,000 years.

Kevin Trenberth, head of climate analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in

Boulder, called the assessment a "diagnosis of the vital signs of the Earth."

"What we have found is that the planet is running a fever, so to speak, and the prognosis is that it's apt to become much worse," Trenberth said.

The scientists said the impacts of global warming observed over the past 30 years -- rising temperatures, melting ice sheets and rising sea levels -- will likely accelerate this century.

"Effects expected include more heavy rains, more drought, more heat waves and more sea level rise," said Susan Solomon, a senior scientist at the Earth System Research Laboratory. "How much depends on how much we choose to emit on a global basis."

While lawmakers are split over how to address climate change, most on the panel agreed the threat is real.

"I'm one of those people who used to pooh-pooh global warming," said Bob Inglis, R-S.C., who said he changed his mind after a visit with fellow lawmakers to Antarctica in 2005. "Now I'm persuaded."

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