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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “American Energy Security and Innovation: Grid Reliability Challenges in a
Shifting Energy Resource Landscape”
Subcommittee on Energy and Power
May 9, 2013

Today, the Subcommittee is holding its third hearing on America’s evolving electricity generation portfolio. There is no question that a significant transition is underway.

Renewable energy policies are paying off. We have doubled our capacity to generate renewable electricity from wind and solar in just four years.

Cheap natural gas is also helping to transform our electricity sector. This market reality is causing some utilities to replace their oldest, dirtiest, and least efficient coal plants with natural gas generation.

These are positive developments. But these changes also create challenges for our electric grid. The testimony from the prior hearings showed that these issues are manageable and that both regulators and grid operators are focused on them.

Yet there has been no focus from the Republican members on the bigger challenges posed by climate change. They offer no solutions ... no ideas for cutting carbon pollution or deploying more clean energy generation. Instead, they attack EPA’s air quality standards and lament the loss of coal’s market share.

There is a confused aspect to these hearings. Some Republican members cannot seem to decide whether they like cheap natural gas or see it as a threat that must be overcome to protect the coal industry. They seem unsure whether they should be celebrating reduced carbon pollution or avoiding the issue all together.

This confusion is not surprising because the Subcommittee still hasn’t examined why this transition in our energy sector must occur. Climate change is the biggest energy challenge we face as a country. We can’t have a meaningful discussion of the transition underway in the energy sector without understanding the threat of climate change.

We have heard a lot lately about U.S. carbon dioxide emissions being at their lowest level in twenty years. The implication is that no further action to address climate change is necessary. That is simply not the case.

As a result of increased renewable energy generation, a shift from coal to natural gas generation, and the economic recession, U.S. emissions from the energy sector have dropped in recent years. But total U.S. emissions from all sources – not just the power sector – actually increased from 2009 to 2011.

What matters most is whether U.S. emissions are on track to decline in the future by the amount needed to prevent dangerous climate change. No reputable expert believes this to be the case.

Scientists tell us that our emissions need to decline by at least 80% below 1990 levels by 2050 to avoid a dangerous level of warming. The latest projections by the Energy Information Administration show that U.S. carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion actually will be 13% higher than 1990 levels in 2040, the last year in EIA's model. There is an enormous gulf between what these emissions will be without additional action and what they need to be to avert catastrophic warming.

Today's hearing continues this unfortunate and counterproductive trend. The majority appears to have called this hearing, in part, to invite attacks on renewable energy. If we're going to hear from opponents of renewable energy and critics of EPA's proposed standard to reduce carbon pollution from new power plants, we should hear from the scientists and technical experts who can explain why it is so important for the United States to reduce its carbon pollution. We should hear from witnesses who can inform the Subcommittee about the dangers of man-made climate change and the closing window for effective action.

The threat of climate change is not going to disappear if we pretend it doesn't exist. We need to start recognizing reality and crafting responsible solutions.