

Opening Statement for Republican Leader Tom McClintock
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
Oversight Hearing: *Examining the Threats to North Atlantic Right Whales*
March 7, 2019

The problem with visions of impending apocalypse is that after the initial hysteria passes, life goes on and the world doesn't end. How disappointing that must be to the prophets of doom! Chicken Little found this out to her embarrassment and many today could learn from her example.

At our hearing on rising oceans, the only climatologist on the panel confirmed that sea level rise has been steady throughout the 20th Century and shows no correlation to atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Indeed, the oceans have risen about 400 feet from the last ice age and can be expected to continue to do so very gradually until temperature equilibrium is achieved.

In the 1980's, climate change was blamed for the impending extinction of the polar bear. You may have noticed we don't hear about polar bear extinction anymore because it turns out their populations are doing very well and have been increasing nicely along with carbon dioxide levels. So today we adopt a new mascot, the Right whale.

The Right whale got its name from the whalers who drove it nearly to extinction in the 19th Century. It was the "right" whale to hunt to supply the lucrative whale oil market. Ironically, it may well have been saved from outright extinction by -- wait for it -- fossil fuels, which made whale oil obsolete.

Now, however, the Right whale is being repurposed as an excuse to discourage fossil fuel use and to impede offshore exploration. We hear voices accusing the dreaded Donald Trump of decimating marine mammals by his administration's support of Incidental Harassment Authorizations which allow for limited seismic testing in the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf.

Before we light our hair on fire, let's confront a few inconvenient truths.

It was the Obama Administration's 2015 five-year oil and gas leasing program that initially proposed opening the Atlantic to offshore energy exploration, and it was the Obama Administration that approved multiple permits supporting seismic testing. From 2015 through 2017, Columbia University received four permits for seismic activity to gather scientific data, including two permits for seismic testing in the Atlantic. Furthermore, the United States Geological Survey conducted seismic surveys in the Atlantic Ocean between 2014-2015.

Seismic testing is NOT synonymous with offshore oil and gas extraction, nor has it been found to be detrimental to marine mammal stocks. Under the Obama Administration, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management both determined that there is no documented evidence of any more than a "negligible impact" to marine mammals resulting from exposure to seismic testing of the ocean floor. It may be annoying, but it is far from dangerous.

We will hear much about the "taking" of marine mammals under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. To most people, a "taking" sounds like a euphemism for "killing." I think it is meant to convey this false impression. But as actually used in the Act, it actually means anything that disturbs marine mammals, irrespective of the health of the marine mammal stock.

Whaling excesses in the pre-fossil fuels period almost destroyed the Right whales in the Northern Atlantic and Pacific. Their populations were driven so low that they are barely measurable and have shown little sign of recovery. Fortunately, according to the International Whaling Commission, "the breeding populations of Argentina/Brazil, South Africa and Australia have shown evidence of strong recovery with annual increase rates of 7-8% and together may now total over 16,000..." More good news: in the North Pacific and Atlantic, other species of whales hunted in the last century are recovering, including Blue whales, (growing about 3 percent per year), Humpback Whales (which have recovered their pre-whaling populations), Fin whales (growing 4 to 5 percent per year in the North Pacific with their populations in the North Atlantic described as "healthy." All this according to the International Whaling Commission.

So there's a lot to celebrate. Most whale species are recovering in the Northern Hemisphere and the Right whale population is making a strong recovery in the Southern Hemisphere – all under current conditions. Happily, so too is American energy independence and the American economy, with great promise of future prosperity and growth from our offshore reserves.

Let's not screw that up today, please.