

Science the GOP can't wish away

By Sherwood Boehlert

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Watching the raft of newly elected GOP lawmakers converge on Washington, I couldn't help thinking about an issue I hope our party will better address. I call on my fellow Republicans to open their minds to rethinking what has largely become our party's line: denying that climate change and global warming are occurring and that they are largely due to human activities.

National Journal reported last month that 19 of the 20 serious [GOP Senate challengers declared that the science of climate change is either inconclusive or flat-out wrong](#). Many newly elected Republican House members take that position. It is a stance that defies the findings of our country's National Academy of Sciences, national scientific academies from around the world and 97 percent of the world's climate scientists.

Why do so many Republican senators and representatives think they are right and the world's top scientific academies and scientists are wrong? I would like to be able to chalk it up to lack of information or misinformation.

I can understand arguments over proposed policy approaches to climate change. I served in Congress for 24 years. I know these are legitimate areas for debate. What I find incomprehensible is the dogged determination by some to discredit distinguished scientists and their findings.

In a trio of reports released in May, the prestigious and nonpartisan National Academy [concluded](#) that "a strong, credible body of scientific evidence shows that climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities and poses significant risks for a broad range of human and natural systems." Our nation's most authoritative and respected scientific body couldn't make it any clearer or more conclusive.

When I was chairman of the House Committee on Science, top scientists from around the world came before our panel. They were experts that Republicans and Democrats alike looked to for scientific insight and understanding on a host of issues. They spoke in probabilities, ranges and concepts - always careful to characterize what was certain, what was suspected and what was speculative. Today, climate scientists - careful as ever in portraying what they know vs. what they suspect - report that the body of scientific evidence supporting the consensus on climate change and its cause is as comprehensive and exhaustive as anything produced by the scientific community.

While many in politics - and not just of my party - refuse to accept the overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change, leaders of some of our nation's most prominent businesses have taken a different approach. They formed the U.S. Climate Action Partnership. This was no collection of mom-and-pop shops operated by "tree huggers" sympathetic to any environmental cause but, rather, a step by hard-nosed, profit-driven capitalists. General Electric, Alcoa, Duke Energy, DuPont, Dow Chemical, Ford, General Motors and Chrysler signed on. USCAP, persuaded by scientific facts, called on the president and Congress to act, saying "in our view, the climate change challenge will create more economic opportunities than risks for the U.S. economy."

There is a natural aversion to more government regulation. But that should be included in the debate about how to respond to climate change, not as an excuse to deny the problem's existence. The current practice of disparaging the science and the scientists only clouds our understanding and delays a solution. The record flooding, droughts and extreme weather in this country and others are consistent with patterns that scientists predicted for years. They are an ominous harbinger.

The new Congress should have a policy debate to address facts rather than a debate featuring unsubstantiated attacks on science. We shouldn't stand by while the reputations of scientists are dragged through the mud in order to win a political argument. And no member of any party should look the other way when the basic operating parameters of scientific inquiry - the need to question, express doubt, replicate research and encourage

curiosity - are exploited for the sake of political expediency. My fellow Republicans should understand that wholesale, ideologically based or special-interest-driven rejection of science is bad policy. And that in the long run, it's also bad politics.

What is happening to the party of Ronald Reagan? He embraced scientific understanding of the environment and pollution and was proud of his role in helping to phase out ozone-depleting chemicals. That was smart policy and smart politics. Most important, unlike many who profess to be his followers, Reagan didn't deny the existence of global environmental problems but instead found ways to address them.

The National Academy reports concluded that "scientific evidence that the Earth is warming is now overwhelming." Party affiliation does not change that fact.

The writer, a Republican, represented New York's 24th District in Congress from 1983 to 2007. He is a special adviser to the Project on Climate Science.

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