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Editorial | Global Warming

Climate scientists badgered

Most members of Congress who want to unravel a scientific controversy call a hearing. There, witnesses with opposing views make their best case.

Or they call the National Academies of Science or another independent panel for expert advice.

Not Texas Republican Joe Barton, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. He has opted for a witch hunt.

Last month, Barton launched an investigation into the research and backgrounds of three prominent climate scientists. He demanded data, financial records, even computer codes, which the National Science Foundation says are private intellectual property.

Barton, an oilman who receives generous campaign support from the energy industry, has long been a skeptic of global warming. Rather than a quest for knowledge, his investigation reeks of harassment of those with whom he disagrees.

In a rebuke sent July 14, Sherwood Boehlert (R., N.Y.), chairman of the House Science Committee, told Barton his tactics raised "the specter of politicians opening investigations against any scientist who reaches a conclusion that makes the political elite uncomfortable." Boehlert accused Barton of intimidation and substituting "political review" for "scientific peer review."

Boehlert is right. Investigations such as Barton's could impede the flow of scientific advice to Capitol Hill, just when lawmakers are facing increasingly complicated energy, medical, environmental and technology issues. Barton's action sets a terrible precedent.

Barton zeroed in on the so-called "hockey stick theory" of global warming, which shows a sharp temperature increase in the 20th century compared with the last 1,000 years. (The theory gets its name from the shape of a graph illustrating it.) The principal author was Michael Mann of the University of Virginia, who will direct the Earth System Science Center at Pennsylvania State University beginning in August.

Barton wanted Mann and his coauthors to justify conclusions of 1998 and 1999 articles, point by point, in light of criticism published by two Canadians earlier this year.

Since the hockey stick theory came out, debate about its validity has been ongoing in appropriate venues - scientific journals and conferences. But Barton doesn't care about that. His attempts to discredit these researchers are meant to foment uncertainty about what is becoming settled science: that human activity is dangerously warming the globe and that industrial nations need to do something to slow it down.

President Bush has acknowledged as much, and the Senate passed a resolution to that effect last month.

Barton should leave peer review to the peers and stop hounding scientists.