

Evolution debate again engulfs Texas board

November 22 2013, by Will Weissert

The long-simmering battle over teaching evolution in Texas boiled over again.

A Republican-controlled Board of Education extended preliminary approval of new science books for use in classrooms across the state but held up one biology text because of alleged factual errors.

What Texas decides has influence across the United States, since it is so large that many books prepared for publication in the state also are marketed elsewhere around the country.

Textbook and classroom curriculum battles have long raged in Texas pitting creationists—those who see God's hand in the creation of the universe—against academics who worry about religious and political ideology trumping scientific fact. At issue this time are proposed textbooks that could be used statewide starting next school year and through 2022 at least.

With midnight looming Thursday night, some of the state education board members singled out a textbook by Pearson Education, one of America's largest publishers. Many of the 20 concerns pertained to the theory of evolution. After a lengthy debate that got testy at times, the board voted to have three of its members pick a trio of outside experts to further scrutinize the book.

The board took a second vote Friday afternoon confirming its previous decision without further discussion. It will take final votes in January.

State law approved two years ago means school districts can now choose their own books and don't have to adhere to a list recommended by the Board of Education—but most have continued to use approved books.

Publishers submitted proposed textbooks this summer, but committees of Texas volunteer reviewers—some nominated by creationists who are current and former Board of Education members—raised objections. One argued that creationism based on biblical texts should be taught in science classes, while others objected that climate change wasn't as settled a scientific matter as some of the proposed books said.

Pearson and many other major publishers weren't willing to make suggested major edits and changes, however. Indeed, Pearson has challenged the 20 alleged errors that the citizen review panel claims are in the biology book.

The concerns raised included how long it took Earth to cool and objection to lessons about natural selection because "selection operates as a selective but not a creative force," according to reviewers.

Delaying the book's approval pending outside review was a proposal championed by some of the most conservative members among the board's 10 Republicans. But its five Democrats joined with more-moderate Republicans in questioning whether reviewers' objections were factually correct.

"I believe this process is being hijacked, this book is being held hostage to make political changes," said Thomas Ratliff, a Republican from Mount Pleasant who is vice chairman of the Board of Education.

He said he believed the same biology book was already being used in "over half of the classrooms in the United States."

"To ask me—a business degree major from Texas Tech University—to distinguish whether the Earth cooled 4 billion years ago or 4.2 billion years ago for purposes of approving a textbook at 10:15 on a Thursday night is laughable," Ratliff said.

Colleagues on the other side of the debate shot back that they "weren't laughing."

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