

Former US climate chiefs urge political unity

June 18 2014, by Kerry Sheridan



William Reilly, who led the EPA under George H.W. Bush from 1989 to 1993, testifies on Capitol Hill on March 16, 2011 in Washington

Four former heads of the US Environmental Protection Agency who served under Republican presidents urged lawmakers Wednesday to stop bickering over whether climate change is real and start finding solutions.

Global warming is an increasingly polarizing issue in American politics, with most Republicans questioning the science behind it and most Democrats calling for stricter pollution limits.

The debate has kicked up in intensity since President Barack Obama earlier this month called on the EPA to set carbon pollution standards for power plants that would cut carbon emissions 30 percent by 2030.

Obama's announcement, his most ambitious yet against [climate change](#), also called for increasing global cooperation to curb pollution and for US financial incentives for renewable energy.

"President Obama's new climate regulations... will harm our fragile American economy," Senator Ron Barrasso, a Republican from Wyoming, told the hearing of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

"Thousands of people will lose their jobs," he added, describing the measures as "all pain and little gain" toward reducing global temperature.

'Scare tactics '

Barrasso and fellow senators on the bipartisan committee spent the entire first hour of the two-and-a-half hour hearing making their own opening statements, in which they debated the legitimacy of climate science and traded warnings over the cost of acting versus the cost of not acting.

Senator Barbara Boxer, a Democrat from California, said she has been called a "job killer" for years, each time she has supported an initiative to make way for a cleaner environment.

"These scare tactics, they have been tried before and they are just not real," said Boxer, who chairs the committee.



Former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator Christine Todd Whitman speaks at the Council on Foreign Relations on June 14, 2004 in New York City

The four former EPA administrators who testified at the hearing included those who served over the past four decades under presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and his son, George W. Bush.

As a group, the quartet penned an op-ed in the New York Times last year that said there was no longer any credible debate over whether humans were causing climate change.

At the hearing, they reiterated this stance, and said stricter pollution limits mean job creation is likely in the fields of renewables, nuclear, clean coal and natural gas.

They also urged lawmakers to put aside their differences and find ways to pursue energy-efficient solutions.

Constructive response

"The two parties were able to rally around a common purpose in the early days of environmental policy making," said Christine Todd Whitman, former New Jersey governor who served as EPA chief under George W. Bush from 2001 to 2003.

"It is urgent that they do so again."

William Reilly, who led the EPA under George H.W. Bush from 1989 to 1993, praised Obama's moves and said state lawmakers need to follow suit.

"While the president has taken many important steps, a full and constructive response is needed from Congress," Reilly said.

The first-ever administrator of the EPA, which was founded in 1970, said the United States has a responsibility to lead the rest of the world.

"We like to speak of American exceptionalism," said William Ruckelshaus, who served from 1970 to 1973 under Nixon and again from 1983 to 1985 under Reagan.

"If we want to be truly exceptional then we should begin the difficult task of leading the world away from the unacceptable effects of our increasing appetites for fossil fuels before it is too late," he said.

A poll out Wednesday by the Wall Street Journal and NBC News found that while Obama's popularity is down to 41 percent, matching a previous low, a majority of Americans agree with him on climate change.

More than six in 10 of the 1,000 Americans surveyed said action is needed against climate change, and 57 percent said they would favor a proposal to curb greenhouse gas emissions even if it meant higher energy bills.

Two-thirds of respondents said they either strongly or somewhat support Obama's rules to set limits on power plant emissions, and 29 percent said they were opposed.

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