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Textbook publishers criticized

ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — Textbook publishers are being criticized by a political watchdog group that says the publishers rewrote some books to reflect views of social conservatives.

The nonprofit Texas Freedom Network said Monday that several publishers revised social studies books after taking heat from social conservatives at state textbook hearings earlier this year.

The State Board of Education is scheduled to adopt new textbooks for Texas schools in November.

"Instead of standing guard and protecting the thoroughness and accuracy of textbooks, some publishers are now caving in to pressure from a handful of very noisy would-be censors," said Samantha Smoot, executive director of the Freedom Network.

Representatives for textbook publishers insisted the changes cited by the Texas Freedom Network are a small fraction of the revisions that have been made since the original versions of the books were presented to the state.

"These kinds of discussions and changes are very common and part of the lengthy state

adoption process in Texas," said Joe Bill Watkins of the Association of American Publishers.

The Freedom Network said one publisher agreed to eliminate references to "fossil fuels being formed millions of years ago" so there would be no conflict with biblical timelines, which indicate the Earth has existed for a much shorter time.

Another publisher deleted a passage that said Osama bin Laden's orders to his followers to kill Americans runs counter to Muslim teachings. "No idea could be farther from Muslim teachings," the deleted passage said. Critics said the book was too kind in describing Muslim beliefs.

"These are not changes called for by the mainstream public but by a handful of religious extremists," Smoot said. "They're demanding textbook changes to suit their religious and political beliefs. It is censorship, plain and simple."

She noted that the State Board of Education rejected an environmental science textbook last year after social conservative groups objected to its praise for the federal Endangered Species Act and its warning about the threat of global warming.

One of the conservative groups particularly active in reviewing textbooks this year is the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

"Our textbook reviewers did what good outside reviewers should do. They sought to broaden the information going into the textbooks," said Michael Quinn Sullivan of the Public Policy Foundation.

"It is a real victory for Texas that we had so much citizen input into these textbooks from groups of all political persuasions," he said. "Hopefully, we all are coming from the perspective that we want more people involved in the textbook review process not fewer."

Textbooks the state board adopts in November will be used for the next six years, beginning in fall 2003. Board members

have already held three public hearings on the books.

Textbook adoption proceedings in Texas have long drawn national interest because decisions reverberate across the country. Only California buys more textbooks in the United States, and publishers whose books are adopted here market them in dozens of other states.