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GOVERNOR

Perry's strong views on climate change can be muted at home

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From worried school kids to supportive senior citizens, constituents coaching Texas Gov. Rick Perry about global warming get back a letter thanking them for writing on the "theory" and saying alternative energy sources and conservation make sense. Perry's staff tucks into each reply contact information for legislators.

"Undoubtedly, as we look to the future, we must ensure that excellent stewardship of our environment remains an ongoing priority," Perry writes.

None of Perry's responses since January has mentioned that he personally doubts man-made contributions to warming or that he believes that any Texas actions to gauge or regulate greenhouse gases would be premature, potentially wreaking havoc in the state that leads the nation in such emissions. He did not mention the topic in his state of the state address this year and only sporadically did during his re-election campaign last year.

But he expressed his views forcefully in a Sept. 7 speech to California Republicans.

"I've heard Al Gore talk about man-made global warming so much that I'm starting to think that his mouth is the leading source of all that supposedly deadly carbon dioxide," Perry said.

"Virtually every day another scientist leaves the global warming bandwagon. ... But you won't read about that in the press because they have already invested in one side of the story. I'm not saying we shouldn't be good stewards of our environment. We should. I am just saying when politics hijack science, it quells true scientific debate and can have dire consequences for our future."

Perry's mailbag also shows that he declined Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's invitation to attend a July climate summit and hasn't answered a Democratic legislator's call for a Texas study of climate change.

Perry was unavailable for an interview on the subject, but his policy analyst, Zak Covar, summed up the governor's stance:

"He's not sitting back waiting to see what other states do; he's not convinced that it's an issue," Covar said.

Diverging from U.N.

Perry spokeswoman Allison Castle said Perry hasn't seen Gore's PowerPoint call for action, "An Inconvenient Truth," and won't until Gore concedes that it contains errors.

Asked for elaboration on the scientists who Perry said are abandoning the "global warming bandwagon," his office listed two dozen recent articles, almost none about scientists. They range from calls for Gore to lose his Academy Award to a posting from the Tehran Times ("Iran's leading international daily") stating that Gore doesn't deserve the Nobel Peace Prize because as a senator he voted to authorize the first Gulf War.

Castle said the articles show "a myriad of points of view from people who do not succumb to the notion global warming is man-made."

Perry's office also touts work by Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., who has called global warming a hoax and identified a dozen scientists who have changed their views on the impact of carbon dioxide, which is a common emission of power plants and automobiles.

Set against them are more than 2,500 scientists who participated in the United Nations panel on climate change, which studied the issue for more than a decade.

In Texas, state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon said last week that the governor and his office had not sought his opinion on climate change. He was among the faculty members of atmospheric sciences at Texas A&M University who unanimously endorsed the findings of the U.N. climate change panel over the summer.

"The (U.N. panel of scientists) is as close to a document reflecting the scientific consensus as we're going to get," Nielsen-Gammon said. "Since it's gone through public and scientific review, it's as close to free of error as it's going to get. And since it's been vetted word-for-word by the hundred or so nations that participated in it, it's not just a scientific consensus, but also a political consensus as well."

In the past month, Nielsen-Gammon has talked about climate change at the invitation of naturalists in La Grange, at a University of Texas risk management conference in Galveston, and in a debate at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall.

"There are sufficient amounts of misinformation out there that I feel compelled to add a calm voice," Nielsen-Gammon said.

Eric Barron, dean of the Jackson School of Geosciences at UT, said scientists agree that the climate is warming and that humans contribute to it. "Where consensus becomes more difficult is about how fast warming will occur and how significant it will be," he said.

Taking steps elsewhere

Depending on developments elsewhere, Perry could prove to be proudly out of step with most governors on whether states, in the absence of action in Washington, should independently gauge emissions and battle climatic change.

Since March, more than 30 states, including nine of the 10 most populous, have signed on to a climate registry intended to standardize how carbon dioxide emissions are reported, in anticipation of federal and state regulations.

Invitation packets were sent to every governor last spring, organizers said, but Texas didn't respond. Castle said Perry did not receive an invitation but probably would not have joined the registry.

Some states have done more than join the registry. In California, GOP Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last year signed a law intended to reduce emissions in his state over time. Republican governors Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, Linda Lingle of Hawaii and M. Jodi Rell of Connecticut have signed on to lead a clean energy initiative that was recently put together by the National Governors Association; it aims at finding ways to cut carbon dioxide emissions.

"Governors are uniquely positioned to help wean the country from imported oil, reduce our contribution to global CO2 emissions and promote energy efficiency measures," the association said.

Perry may not be lining up with other governors, but he seems to be in step with Texas' Republican-controlled Legislature.

Technically, the state has the power to regulate greenhouse gases under the state health code, but the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has declined to do so. Measures intended to get the agency to regulate carbon dioxide stalled in the 2007 legislative session.

During the session, Reps. Phil King, R-Weatherford, chairman of the panel that oversees utilities, and Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, chairman of the Environmental Regulation Committee, questioned whether humans contribute to climate change.

Perry's position also fits neatly with a new effort by the Texas Public Policy Foundation to alert Texans to flaws in conventional global warming perceptions.

"Despite what you hear from Gore's cheerleaders in the media, many scientists disagree with the scientific basis of his findings," foundation President Brooke Rollins wrote in a Sept. 14 fundraising letter sent to about 5,000 people launching the Global Warming Initiative.

Money raised will "educate Texas policymakers and staff on global warming" through meetings and distribution of materials.

Oil and gas companies sponsor an annual fundraising event for the foundation.

"You have a state that's a production powerhouse," said Drew Thornley, a policy analyst for the foundation. Regulating carbon dioxide, he said, "will handicap the economy of Texas."

Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth, sent two letters to Perry over the summer urging him to convene a study of climate change and how it would affect Texas.


"The governor is still failing to acknowledge the problem," Burnam said.

Covar said last week that Perry wouldn't fight a study. "This is an issue that ought to be debated and discussed in the scientific community, not in the political arena," the governor's adviser said.

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