



Gary Peters: Peters Floor Remarks on the Need to Address Climate Change and Web of Denial Blocking Action

Gary Peters

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -U.S. Senator Gary Peters (MI) spoke on the Senate Floor last night to discuss the threat of climate change and industry-led organizations that are working to block action on climate change. Below is the text of his remarks as prepared for delivery.

'As the ranking member on the Subcommittee on Science, Space, and Competitiveness, I know how important it is for our country to invest in scientific research and make informed decisions based on the findings.

'Sound science has played a critical role in the United States becoming a leader in fields like space exploration, medical research, advanced manufacturing, and other high-tech industries. So when 97 percent of scientists in a particular field agree on a serious problem, it is wise for policy-makers to listen.

'The scientific community is sounding the alarm about the urgent need to address the causes of global climate change. Scientists here in the United States and across the world overwhelmingly agree that the weight of evidence is clear: global temperatures are rising, drastic changes in weather and climate have accompanied this warming, and humans are largely responsible due to our emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

'Military leaders, doctors, economists, and biologists are among the experts warning us that global climate change is a major threat to the national security, public health, our economy, and the natural resources of the United States.

'Unfortunately, powerful special interests, led by some organizations and companies in the fossil fuel industry, are deliberately spreading false information about climate change to influence public opinion and muddle the truth.

'The strategy to confuse the public about climate change science and delay policy action has many parallels to the strategy used by Big Tobacco to mislead the public about the scientific evidence linking smoking to lung cancer and heart disease.

'The corporations spreading disinformation on climate change are the same interests that have the most to gain financially by stopping meaningful action to reduce greenhouse gases, protect our clean air, and address global warming for future generations.

'The Koch Brothers are a prime example of this fact. Charles and David Koch make their vast fortunes from owning companies that profit from a range of dirty industries. Much of their wealth is funneled into activist groups that produce questionable information and the 'spin' meant to support their own interests. The 'web of denial' they have created is a threat to sound, science-based decision making.

'While some big polluters seek to confuse and cloud the judgment of decision-makers and the public, the American people continue to suffer the consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels. These consequences are not just limited to rising global temperatures.

'The people of Michigan are paying for the costs of coal and oil pollution in many ways, but I'd like to focus on just a few examples here today.

'A few years ago, three-story high piles of petroleum coke, or pet coke, lined the banks of the Detroit River in the open air. Pet coke is essentially the industrial byproduct that is produced during the oil refining process. These particular piles were owned by Koch Carbon, a company controlled by the Koch Brothers.

'Usually pet coke is shipped off to other countries, where it is burned as a fuel, worsening terrible air quality problems in places like China and contributing to global climate change. In this case, the banks of the Detroit River were being treated as a dumping ground to store these mountains of pet coke. The wind would blow the pet coke dust everywhere, including into the homes and lungs of those living in the neighborhood close by. It was even documented blowing across the river into Windsor, Ontario. Not only was the air being contaminated, the pet coke was fouling the Great Lakes, a source of drinking water for over 40 million people. When it rained, pollution would runoff from the piles into the Detroit River, part of Great Lakes system.

'I joined residents in Detroit to call for these pet coke piles to be moved, and only through a community wide effort were we eventually successful. I've also introduced legislation to study the health and environmental impacts of pet coke.

'Unfortunately, this same area of Detroit that has had to deal with mountains of particulate matter blowing into the air already had the distinction of having some of the worst air quality in the nation.

'Research shows that exposure to air pollution at a young age can lead to health problems like asthma, and air pollution can worsen asthma symptoms. Detroit has the highest rate of asthma in young children among the 18 largest cities in the United States. Over 12 percent of Detroit children have asthma-the national rate is around 8 percent.

'Most air pollution comes from the burning of fossil fuels, and parts of Detroit are dealing with high pollutant levels as a result. I wrote a letter, along with Senator Stabenow, calling for a plan to reduce sulfur dioxide levels in southwest Detroit and comply with federal clean air standards. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality finally just submitted their plan to comply, over a year past the initial deadline.

'These examples in Detroit show how protecting clean air and clean water are often issues environmental justice-those most affected by pollution are often from low-income and minority households. Addressing climate change will also improve the air quality in these affected areas.

'While these communities bear the brunt of fossil fuel pollution, the Koch Brothers and others pour hundreds of millions and even billions of dollars into activities to avoid regulation of their dirty industries.

'One of the tactics that powerful corporate industries use is to bankroll numerous front groups to spread misinformation. The idea behind this strategy is to use seemingly independent organizations, such as think-tanks, to deliver misleading messages that the public might rightly dismiss if they heard them directly from industry.

'They have calculated that it is better for business to mislead the American public rather than acknowledge the scientific evidence and their role in climate change and join the effort to combat this growing threat to our planet.

'It's a page taken right out of Big Tobacco's playbook. By creating their own scientific studies and policy papers from a network of surrogates, it gives the appearance that there is a legitimate debate over the fundamentals of climate change science.

'One example is the Cato Institute. For years, the organization has received funding from fossil fuel interests such as ExxonMobil and the Koch Family. At the same time, Cato spreads climate skepticism-over a span of about 15 years, the Cato Institute published 773 thousand words and 768 documents expressing climate skepticism.

'The web of denial is intended to manufacture doubt among the American public in order to delay climate action. But the spending efforts by the same corporations also specifically target elected officials and other key decision-makers to prevent meaningful action on global warming.

'The Koch Brothers have poured vast sums of money in election ads, lobbying efforts, and campaign donations, often funneled through other organizations to hide the source of the funding. As result, I have heard many climate myths repeated in the halls of Congress that were carefully crafted by the network of climate denial front groups.

'Late last year, the Senate Subcommittee on Science, Space, and Competitiveness held a hearing that was specifically designed to cast doubt on the scientific evidence of climate change.

'The witness panel was stacked by the majority with prominent climate deniers. The one witness that I was able to invite as the Ranking Member was Rear Admiral David Titley, who--as the Navy's chief meteorologist--initiated and led the Navy's Task Force on Climate Change. At the hearing, Dr. Titley outlined how climate change is a serious threat to national security.

'Admiral Titley explained that the military makes decisions based on known information and calculations of risk. Often they must act on less than perfect intelligence, but they understand risk and will take action to prevent threats when given the chance.

'The Admiral applied this to the broad agreement among climate scientists, saying that any military commander would take action 'in a heartbeat' if there was consensus among 97 percent of the intelligence community about a particular scenario. In fact, the military has already started taking action to anticipate vulnerabilities and mitigate the impacts related to climate change. The brightest, most experienced minds in our military realize that our reliance on fossil fuels leaves our troops and citizens exposed to more risk at home and abroad.

'Unfortunately, Congress has not been as quick to act. Efforts to pass meaningful legislation to address climate change have been blocked. Existing administrative efforts to reduce emissions or invest in clean energy have been attacked.

'We can and must pass legislative solutions to address global climate change. Transitioning away from fossil fuels and investing in renewable energy will create sustainable, good-paying jobs here in the United States.

'Taking bold action on climate change will strengthen our public health, our economy, and our national security. We must wake up and realize that those attempting to mislead and confuse must not be successful.

'I am confident that we will overcome this web of denial and use peer-reviewed, sound scientific information to guide our decision-making in order to create a resilient future for our children and grandchildren.'