

‘The stakes are too high’: Climate skeptics meet their own critics at state House committee hearing

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A testy hearing featuring both nationally known climate skeptics and an Ivy League expert in climatology played out Monday before a state House committee.

The handling of the controversial hearing — the third on climate change featuring dissenting voices this year — by House Environmental Resources & Energy Committee Chairman Daryl Metcalfe, R-Butler, led at least one Democratic lawmaker to walk out.



Metcalfe at one point turned off the microphone of the panel’s ranking Democrat, Rep. Greg Vitali of Delaware County. He also threatened to have a University of Pennsylvania climate researcher sitting in the audience thrown out when she cried “not true” during testimony by a noted climate skeptic.

The hearing came in response to Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf’s Oct. 3 announcement that he wants Pennsylvania to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a nine-state cap-and-trade program that puts a price on carbon emissions.

The program only applies to electricity production, and is expected to raise between \$250 to \$400 million in revenue annually.

Echoing other Republicans in the Legislature, Metcalfe at the time called Wolf’s announcement an instance of executive overreach.

His critique only became more stark Monday after the hearing.

“[Wolf] couldn’t get his \$4.5 billion severance tax, so now he’s trying to screw the people of Pennsylvania and take more out of their pockets through RGGI and other initiatives,” Metcalfe said. “And he’s not going to get away with it.”

Two people who testified before the committee — Gregory Wrightstone, a geologist with connections to the natural gas industry, and Marc Morano, a congressional staffer turned prominent climate skeptic — tried to downplay the danger of climate change while painting advocates as alarmists.

Wrightstone argued that true climate hawks should consider more hydroelectric projects, which produce carbon-free electricity but also ruin scenic landscapes prized by conservationists.

“If you’re not willing to do something like that, maybe it’s not a crisis,” he said.

While many who testified Monday opposed any restrictions on carbon, only one speaker — Gordon Tomb, with Harrisburg’s free market-favoring Commonwealth Foundation — provided research on the impacts of RGGI.

He cited a review by the libertarian Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, that found increased consumer costs and “a reduction in energy-intensive industries” compared to select states not in RGGI.

Other studies have found rosier results.

A September report released by an environmental think tank, the Arcadia Center, found that average electricity prices dropped by 5.7 percent between 2008 and 2017 in RGGI states.

A 2015 Duke University study, meanwhile, found that while RGGI did have a significant impact in reducing carbon emissions, some credit should also be given to a sluggish economy and low natural gas prices.

Multiple members of the state’s environmental community, from groups including PennFuture, PennEnvironment, and the state Sierra Club chapter, spoke in favor of more aggressive action on climate change.

Rob Altenburg, with the PennFuture Energy Center, argued that a fee on carbon would correct years of free-carbon pollution by the fossil fuel industry.

And whether the Legislature likes it or not, he added, lawmakers have a duty to fight climate change and any environmental degradation that comes with it.

“You all take a solemn oath to defend our state’s Constitution,” Altenburg said.

In Pennsylvania, that includes a right to clean air and water, safeguarded by the state government. The state Supreme Court has recently ruled a wide interpretation of that right.

When PennEnvironment’s David Masur compared climate denial to Holocaust deniers, he was sternly rebuked by Metcalfe.

After Vitali defended the remarks, Metcalfe cut him off and turned off Vitali’s mic.

‘I do not envy you’

According to Yale University’s [Climate Change Communication Program](#), 67 percent of Pennsylvanians think climate change is happening.

A half-dozen of those individuals attended Monday’s hearing in tinfoil hats — some flat, others long and pointy — to protest the climate skeptics’ testimony. They were from the Better Path Coalition, a collection of grassroots environmental advocates.



Members of the group also attended a March hearing where Wrightstone appeared, that time in costumes of such mythical creatures as unicorns and the grim reaper. The outfits were a response to Wrightstone saying he would debunk “modern myths” around climate change.

Monday’s hearing also featured testimony from Irina Marinov, a climate researcher at the University of Pennsylvania. She cited [the federal climate assessment](#) released last fall, which predicts billions of dollars in economic damage and increased risk of natural disasters to millions of Americans.

While Pennsylvania has reduced its carbon emissions at a high rate, Marinov said such results should just be a start.

Right now, Pennsylvania produces three times the carbon emissions per-capita as the global average. The state’s total emissions are comparable to European nations, she added.

“Your jobs are much, much harder than mine, and I do not envy you,” Marinov said. “How to achieve such a large transition while balancing social well-being, economic prosperity, and environmental protection is an extremely complex juggling act.”

After testifying, Marinov listened to testimony from Morano, who in rapid succession laid out a number of contradictory news headlines on climate change's impact.

At one point, Morano claimed the oft-used "97 percent" statistic on climate change consensus was "pulled out of thin air."

From the crowd, Marinov responded "not true." Metcalfe then threatened to have anyone who interrupted testimony removed from the hearing.

According to multiple studies, there is an overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is real and caused by humans. The consensus is cited by the National Aeronautic and Space Administration, and more than 80 global National Academies of Science agree.

After the hearing, Marinov said her experience differed from what she was used to in academic settings.

"What kind of political process do we have here, where anybody is allowed to come and say anything crazy about the world?" Marinov told the Capital-Star.

She added in an email that "politicians in Harrisburg need to adjust the disproportionate attention given to contrarians. The stakes are too high to waste the limited, precious time we are given to do good for our planet and for [Pennsylvania]."