

The New York Times

Time to Grill Rex Tillerson on Climate Change

Robert B. Semple Jr.

January 10, 2017

The dominant issues at Wednesday's hearing on the nomination of Rex Tillerson, the former chief executive of Exxon Mobil, for secretary of state are likely to be Mr. Tillerson's ties to Russian president Vladimir Putin and any potential conflicts of interest arising from Exxon's extensive global operations. But members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will be sadly delinquent if they do not press him on the issue of climate change.

Mr. Tillerson, who concedes that climate change is a problem, has been seen as a bright spot in the bleak lineup of climate deniers that Donald Trump has named to other cabinet positions. But that's a very low bar, and if Mr. Tillerson has any hope of raising the issue to the prominence it deserves, and changing the mind of a president-elect who has already called global warming a "hoax," he will have to be tough and tenacious. And he won't be unless he really cares.

It will fall to the committee's Democrats — in particular people like Ed Markey of Massachusetts and Tom Udall of New Mexico — to try to find out whether he does, for at least two reasons. One is that the secretary of state will be pivotal in maintaining America's leadership role in the worldwide effort to reduce greenhouse gases — an effort that reached an important milestone in the global agreement in Paris a little over a year ago when 195 countries agreed to join in keeping global temperature increases below dangerous levels. That agreement would not have been possible without the extraordinary diplomatic labors of John Kerry, the person Mr. Tillerson is nominated to replace, and also a person who saw climate change as a supremely important issue and put it near the top of his agenda.

The second reason to gauge the level of Mr. Tillerson's interest is that he is a career employee of an industry whose main products, oil and natural gas, contribute mightily to global carbon emissions and whose interest in regulating those emissions has been close to zero.

Exxon has been particularly negligent, indeed borderline duplicitous. Investigations in 2015 by two news organizations, Inside Climate News and the Los Angeles Times, showed that even though Exxon's scientists (along with most mainstream scientists) long ago understood the link between global warming and the burning of fossil fuels, Exxon's top management, beginning in the late 1990s, began pouring money into dozens of right-leaning interest groups whose main purpose was to cast doubt on that very science. The company's chairman at the time, Lee

Raymond, joined with other business leaders to try to block American participation in an international climate treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, and made sure that the company contributed generously to politicians who questioned the existence of climate change.

Mr. Tillerson succeeded to the top job in 2006, and is rightly credited with ending or reducing company funding of the most extreme of the climate deniers. These include the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, whose program on global warming and international environmental policy is run by Myron Ebell, a Trump adviser and as polarizing a figure on environmental and energy issues as there is. But how much of this was public relations is not clear. In any case, according to Union of Concerned Scientists and Greenpeace, which keeps meticulous track of these things, as of 2015 Exxon continued to fund other groups like the American Enterprise Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council that also seek to foster doubts about climate change.

Exxon now states on its website that “the risk of climate change is clear and the risk warrants action.” In May, Mr. Tillerson said, “At Exxon Mobil, we share the view that the risks of climate change are serious and warrant thoughtful action.” The unsettling thing there is the phrase “thoughtful action,” which sounds for all the world like “common sense solutions,” the usual formulation when politicians plan to do nothing. What the world needs in a secretary of state is far greater sense of urgency than that, not to mention an agenda for action.