

Utah's Stewart skeptical about climate change threat

Politics • As Utah freshman takes over as chairman of committee overseeing EPA, he says science isn't settled.

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Chris Detrick | Tribune file photo Rep. Kraig Powell, R-Heber City, believes it is time to begin grappling with the consequences of climate change -- in policies like firefighting and other issues. His bill to adopt such a stance formally was rejected recently by the Utah Legislature.

Washington • Count Utah Rep. Chris Stewart among the skeptics of climate change science and President Barack Obama's attempts to use federal regulations to curb carbon emissions.

That position puts freshman House member Stewart well within the mainstream of Republican politics, but his views now hold more weight than those of many of his colleagues.

He's the new chairman of the House environmental subcommittee charged with overseeing the politically charged debate. Stewart leads his first hearing Wednesday focused on the Environmental Protection Agency and he has plans for more that will delve into potential federal actions in the name of climate science — actions he worries may be too drastic and costly.

"I'm not as convinced as a lot of people are that man-made climate change is the threat they think it is," he told The Salt Lake Tribune. "I think it is probably not as immediate as some people do."

Stewart doesn't deny that the world's climate is warming, but he believes more research is needed to determine why.

He also believes policymakers need to examine the issue through a fiscal lens. He thinks Congress should take a three-step approach before taking action in the name of climate change, starting with a look at the science.

"What is the real threat? What are the economic impacts of those threats? And what are the economic impacts of those remedies?" he asked, explaining his approach. "Some of the remedies are more expensive to our economy than the threat may turn out to be."

Stewart points to Obama's failed plan to cap carbon emissions for businesses and let them sell credits to bigger polluters. The House rejected the cap-and-trade plan in his first term, partly because estimates said it would result in a spike in utility bills for families.

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EPA actions • Congress is no more likely to pass a major climate change bill now, though Obama has made it clear that he will use his power as president to fight to reduce carbon emission, largely through the EPA. Any such actions would likely come before Stewart's subcommittee.

Before joining Congress, Stewart ran the Shipley Group, a company that conducted environmental training and assessments to meet federal guidelines. He said that didn't make him an expert on environmental policy but did give him a unique perspective into federal regulations that hampered businesses and regulations that protected vital lands.

Stewart's position on climate change didn't surprise Tim Wagner, of the Sierra Club of Utah, but it did irritate him.

"If he is overseeing a committee that is supposed to be based on science, but ignoring the science, it doesn't do much for his credibility," said Wagner. "Unless he's trying to appeal to a specific industry, which is fossil fuels."

Stewart's 2nd Congressional District includes the oil refineries in south Davis County. Donors associated with oil and gas contributed more than \$40,000 to his 2012 campaign, his second highest total behind contributions from Republican officials, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

"I was elected based on my values, and I work to represent my constituents in all that I do," said Stewart, who dismissed any suggestion that he bases policy decisions on campaign contributions.

A large majority of climate scientists agree that humans are contributing to climate change, which is melting the polar ice caps and leading to a spike in volatile weather, from more dangerous hurricanes to vast wildfires.

Wagner argues that if Stewart wants to examine the economic impacts he should start by looking at the damage Hurricane Sandy inflicted in New York and New Jersey or the fires that devoured homes in Colorado and Utah last summer.

"Those are real costs and if you ignore those, then you are ignoring your constituents," he said.

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Political fight • Stewart says that the issue has become overly politicized with environmentalists using climate change as a justification for blocking projects that have little environmental downsides but big economic upsides. As an example, he points to the proposed Keystone pipeline that would bring oil from Canada through the United States to refineries in the Gulf Coast. The federal government's own study found minimal environmental impacts, but groups like the Sierra Club fight the pipeline because they want to speed a move away from fossil fuels toward renewable energy sources to combat a warming climate.

"Look, that oil is going to go somewhere. It is going to go to market. Isn't it better that the oil would be refined in the U.S. where we have stricter environmental rules than in China or India?" Stewart asked.

Utah state Rep. Kraig Powell, R-Heber City, says climate change has turned into a proxy fight between environmentalists and the oil and gas industries, and he calls for those involved, including Stewart, to approach the issue with an open mind.

Powell sponsored a bill this year that would have the Utah Legislature recognize climate change as human caused and allow land managers to take it into account when planning for wildfires. His bill was defeated in committee 11 to 4.

Afterward a few of his Republican colleagues told him he wasn't representing the party position, and others argued that any efforts to combat climate change would be extremely costly and have minimal benefits.

"I think it behooves us to be willing to commission the studies, to listen to the experts and try to figure out what the evidence and data are showing," he said.

Stewart promises to do that, saying he'll "let the science speak for itself."

But at the same time he bristles at comments like one that Sally Jewell, Obama's nominee to lead the Interior Department, recently made before a Senate hearing. Of climate change, she said: "There's no question in my mind that it is real, and the scientific evidence is there to back that up."

Stewart responded: "I don't think that is true. I think there are varied and reasoned and capable opinions from people who say that the science on this is not settled."

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To listen in

The subcommittee on Environment will hold a hearing Wednesday on "Improving EPA's Scientific Advisory Processes." Beginning at 8 a.m. MDT the hearing will be available on live webcast at: <http://1.usa.gov/WTHniH>

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Utah Committee posts

All of Utah's Republican members of Congress lead or are the ranking member of at least a subcommittee. Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, is the exception, though he does have a coveted spot on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has an expansive jurisdiction.

Rep. Rob Bishop • Chairman of the public lands subcommittee on the House Natural Resources Committee, overseeing National Parks and issues pertaining to wilderness.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz • Chairman of the national security subcommittee on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, overseeing military and international programs.

Rep. Chris Stewart • Chairman of the environment subcommittee on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, overseeing climate change and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Sen. Orrin Hatch • Ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, overseeing tax policy, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security

Sen. Mike Lee • Ranking member of the antitrust subcommittee on the Senate Judiciary Committee, overseeing major business mergers

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