

Testimony of Tom Knutson

for the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
hearing on “Climate Change Research and Scientific Integrity”
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Introduction

My name is Tom Knutson. I am a climate scientist at NOAA’s Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory in Princeton, New Jersey. I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to testify today about my experiences as a government scientist in communicating science-related topics to the media. Any opinions I express here are my own, and do not necessarily reflect those of NOAA or the Department of Commerce.

Science Background

I have authored several publications in leading climate science journals on the question of global warming and hurricanes. Most of my career I have worked at GFDL--one of the world’s leading climate modeling centers. I am a member of a WMO (World Meteorological Organization) committee on Tropical Cyclones and Climate Change. We developed, in collaboration with a cross section of the international tropical cyclone research community, an assessment statement on this topic, which was released this past December. I am currently on the author team for the U.S. CCSP (Climate Change Science Program) assessment report on “Weather and Climate Extremes in a Changing Climate,” where I and several others are focusing on hurricane aspects.

My Experiences with the Media and NOAA Public Affairs

During my career, at no time have I perceived any interference from NOAA management with my research efforts or scientific publications in journals such as the *Journal of Climate*. Concerning my interactions with the media and with NOAA Public Affairs in Washington, I will say at the outset that I have had many opportunities to communicate my science to the media over the years. However, among these I have had just a few opportunities to address a national television audience. There have been instances where my ability to communicate with the national media has been hindered or interfered with. I will briefly describe some of these experiences.

A New NOAA Media Policy - 2004

NOAA’s media policy issued in June 2004 requires prior notification of Public Affairs before media interviews involving policy relevant research such as mine. This led to a number of missed opportunities for interviews, at times simply due to the additional hurdle and complexity of getting in touch or coordinating with Public Affairs people in Washington (for example evenings and weekends). I and several of my colleagues at GFDL have been frustrated by this burden. Some of us believe it has caused some

reporters to steer away from GFDL scientists for interviews because of the various hurdles and time constraints. Reporters are busy and often operate under tight deadlines.

Several of us at GFDL have had Public Affairs officers monitor some interviews, typically through phone conferencing. In one case a public affairs officer traveled from Washington to New Jersey to be in the room with me for a television interview. He did not interfere with the interview.

The impression I had (along with others at GFDL) is that at times NOAA Public Affairs was becoming more of an obstruction than a promoter of interaction between GFDL scientists and the media. Examples of such interference that either others or I experienced included: cancelled press releases, requests for interviews that were never responded to (“i.e., pocket vetoes”), and being given guidelines for steering certain interview questions in directions that were not based on science considerations.

Press Release Example

In August 2004, I was asked by NOAA Public Affairs to send them copy of an upcoming paper in the *Journal of Climate* so that a press release could be prepared. I never heard back from them and apparently no press release was issued. Despite this, the New York Times learned about the upcoming paper and ran a story on it that generated considerable media interest and more interviews.

On the Term “Global Warming”

In summer 2005, I was invited by the American Meteorological Society (or AMS) to give a talk here on Capitol Hill on my research. I followed NOAA procedures for this type of appearance, sending my Powerpoint presentation to Legislative Affairs for review several days prior to my talk. I received email expressing some concern with my use of the term “Global Warming” in the title. I did not make any changes, and a few days later received emails indicating that the term would be OK for my particular talk. (By that time seminar announcements advertising a talk on “hurricanes in a warming world” had already been released on the internet by the AMS.)

Two “Turned Down” National TV Appearances on “Global Warming and Hurricanes”

Later that summer, returning from vacation, I listened over the weekend to a voice mail from NOAA Public Affairs inquiring about whether I would be interested in appearing on a television talk show involving Ron Reagan, Jr., to discuss hurricanes and global warming. A second voice mail came from a “booker” for the show. As it was the weekend, I responded to the booker’s cell number and agreed to make myself available for taping on Monday, providing the appearance was approved by Public Affairs. Arriving at my office on Monday morning, I listened to a new voice mail from Public Affairs advising me something to the effect of: “Tom, sorry for the confusion.... The White House said no...”

On October 19, 2005, I received a media request to appear on the CNBC program “On the Money” where I had appeared several weeks earlier. I contacted NOAA Public Affairs for approval. A few minutes later I was called by a Public Affairs person and was quizzed for several minutes on what I planned to say on the program. I was asked whether I thought there was a trend in Atlantic hurricane activity. I gave a guarded response that, based on recently published work, there was some possibility that a trend was emerging. I received a voicemail a few minutes later informing me that “About the CNBC interview tonight, I’m afraid it has been turned down.” Internal NOAA emails on this incident, obtained later through a FOIA request, are available for review on Congressman Waxman’s web site:
<http://oversight.house.gov/story.asp?ID=1107&Issue=Politics+and+Science>

Some months later I learned that I have the right as a private citizen to talk to the media on my own time, and in principle I could have tried to use this tactic to circumvent NOAA’s “turn down” (assuming a media organization would actually agree to go along.)

In response to questions, I detailed these “turn-down” incidents to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter for a Feb. 13, 2006 article.

Aftermath of Going Public

From the time that Jim Hansen, and later other scientists and I, went public, I have experienced no further interference that I am aware of in communicating with the media. GFDL’s unofficial, operational practice, shortly thereafter, has been to keep NOAA Public Affairs in Washington informed, but generally notify them after the fact about media contacts.

One later incident that I was tangentially involved with was the several-month hold-up, apparently somewhere in the Department of Commerce, of a NOAA FAQ sheet on Atlantic hurricanes and climate that others and I at NOAA had helped to put together. More detail on that incident is presented in a *Nature* article dated Sept. 28, 2006.

Moving Forward

In summary, prior to going public with these incidents, I experienced some cases of what I view as unreasonable levels of interference with my communication with the media. Requirements such as prior notification of Public Affairs have hindered GFDL scientists’ communications with the media. A promising development is a new draft media policy being developed in the Department of Commerce, which includes NOAA. I and others at GFDL will be anxious to see how NOAA will interpret and implement the new policy. I think it is very important that such improved policies be in place to ensure that the channels of communication between government climate scientists and the media and public remain open and free of obstruction.

I appreciate being given the opportunity to testify today. Thank you.