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Earth Near Tipping Point, Climatologist Warns

WASHINGTON-James Hansen returned to Capitol Hill a hero yesterday, but certainly not a conquering hero.

The soft-spoken scientist, hailed as the "whistle-blower for the planet," tried to quiet a standing ovation from environmentalists here with a typically blunt admonition.

"It is not a time to celebrate," said Hansen, 20 years to the day since he became the first leading scientist to warn of the dangers of global warming before a congressional committee.

He returned not to bask in any adulation, but to warn that the Earth is nearing a tipping point, to call for a national carbon tax and to say that CEOs of energy companies may be guilty of crimes against humanity and nature.

On June 23, 1988, by most accounts, the temperature in the committee room hovered at 38C and the U.S. was in the midst of a historic drought when Hansen told a Senate committee he was "99 per cent certain" that humans were warming the global climate.

His comments brought the issue to American consciousness.

The following day, The New York Times carried an account under the headline:

Global warming has begun, expert tells Senate.

Although global warming alarms had been sounding for more than a decade and Canadian scientists were warning of the greenhouse effect in the early 1980s, Hansen's testimony seemed to crystallize the concern and provide the first jolt to the mass media in this country.

Two decades later, now 67 and director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, his message has not changed.

"We have reached a point of planetary emergency," he said.

"There are tipping points in the climate system, which we are very close to, and if we pass them, the dynamics of the system take over and carry you to very large changes which are out of your control."

During a speech at the National Press Club, he rambled, as if his ideas were sprinting well ahead of his words, but he kept an overflow ballroom audience rapt.

Already, he said, the world's safe level of atmospheric carbon dioxide has been exceeded.

Yet, in the 20 years since he first testified, no major U.S. law restricting greenhouse gas emissions has been passed, 21 new coal-fired generating units have been built at power plants in this country and total U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide have climbed by about 18 per cent.

"If there is any single moment that marked the turning point where the climate issue became a serious

public policy issue, June 23, 1988, had to be seen as that moment," said Christopher Flavin, president of the Worldwatch Institute.

"(Yesterday) may mark a second kind of turning point."

Tim Wirth, the onetime Democratic Colorado senator who organized the hearing that day, said he knew he had made much progress with Hansen's testimony when a report made the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated.

"It was a brave and lonely leadership role he played then, and he hasn't stopped one day since," Wirth said.

Hansen's second Capitol Hill appearance in 1989 was before a committee chaired by a Tennessee senator named Al Gore, but the White House edited his statement before Gore's committee, throwing into question his certainty about the link between human activity and global warming.

Hansen was told he could accept the revisions, or he would not be able to testify.

So, in advance of the hearing, he asked Gore to question him on the edited parts, he then revealed the White House edit and the story led all U.S. network newscasts that evening. Hansen then moved out of the political spotlight for 15 years.

Yesterday, Hansen warned of greater forest fire risk in Canada, the extinction of polar and alpine species, danger to the coral reefs and the ocean life that depends on them because of carbon dioxide in the oceans, and refugees from melting ice sheets in Greenland and the western Antarctic.

He called for a phase-out of all coal-burning power plants by 2030 except those in which carbon dioxide is captured and buried and he called for a carbon tax on coal, oil and gas.

The tax, he said, should be returned in full to the public - not used by government - in equal amounts for each adult and a half-share for children, deposited directly into bank accounts or credited to debit cards.

Such a non-regressive tax, Hansen says, will spur low and middle-income people to limit their tax while profligate users will pay for their excesses.

He also accused corporate America of a "greenwash" in which their environmentally friendly words are not backed by actions and he supported criminal charges against CEOs of corporations such as ExxonMobil who are smart enough to know the situation but are intent on continuing their fossil fuel ways.

"When their descendants look back on them, they should not to be able to pretend that they didn't know," Hansen said.

"They do know."

They are also guilty of funding and promoting contrarian views from scientists, furthering a charade that confuses the public into believing there is debate among scientists in this country, Hansen said.

"There is no debate," he said.

Next year, with a new president, a new direction is desperately needed, Hansen said.

He said a call for offshore drilling, sounded last week both by U.S. President George W. Bush and

Republican presumptive nominee John McCain is "crazy."

"To go around drilling for the last drop of oil on the continental shelf will extend our addiction a little bit, but it will put us past the tipping point," he said.

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