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Scientists are a skeptical lot

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It is no secret that scientists are a skeptical lot. The success of our work depends on our commitment to ask questions, answer the questions and then be skeptical about the answers.

This skepticism is implemented through the peer review process and pertains to our own personal research as well as that of others. The process gives credibility to the work of the scientific community and its contributions to our society. This is how we advance, using this reliable source of new information.

One troubling trend that ignores the vetted peer review process occurs when science policy is legislated by politicians. It can be independent of evidence and rigorous interpretation.

Unfortunately, this is the case with Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski's attempt to overturn the Supreme Court's endangerment finding.

On April 2, 2007, the United States Supreme Court found that greenhouse gases are air pollutants covered by the Clean Air Act.

The court ruled that the Environmental Protection Agency must determine if emissions of greenhouse gases that contribute to air pollution are a danger to public health.

On Dec. 7, 2009, the EPA issued its final findings — based on the work and research of thousands of scientists — that the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change do, in fact, constitute a danger to public health and welfare. In layman's terms, the data are clear.

And now, after years of study by thousands of scientists, Sen. Murkowski wants to use an arcane Senate tool to ignore this scientific finding.

Murkowski's proposal would undermine the Clean Air Act, one of the most successful laws ever passed. The Clean Air Act has greatly reduced the pollution that poisons our air and continues to protect Americans' health across the country.

Her proposal would also "substantially erode" new clean cars standards that the major U.S. automakers, the United Auto Workers, and states support, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

These clean cars standards would greatly reduce our dependence on foreign oil, and would improve the quality of life in our country.

In addition to undermining the Clean Air Act, the proposal would ignore the very alarming climate research conducted by thousands of scientists worldwide, including that of North Dakota researchers.

A team of scientists from the region just published a report that warns us of the catastrophic impacts even slight temperature increases will have on ducks in the prairie pothole region.

It is scientific research like this that has led more than two dozen scientists here in North Dakota to sign a statement of principles stating, "We believe that the Earth's climate is warming and that there is strong scientific consensus that human activity is a significant factor. Scientific consensus on climate change has been affirmed by international scientific bodies and polls of scientists' opinions."

Last week, in their most thorough analysis in nearly two decades, the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, said: "Climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for — and in many cases is already affecting — a broad range of human and natural systems."

Many residents in our state have not always had the most cordial relationship with the Environmental Protection Agency; any government agency whose job it is to enforce a variety of regulations is usually not popular.

Sen. Murkowski's motives may very well be rooted in her attempt to prevent the scope of government regulation from growing out of control; however, using an arcane Senate procedural tool to directly assault a scientific finding is not appropriate.

Senators and their constituents should realize that legislating science policy that contradicts the preponderance of the evidence sets a dangerous precedent.

(This op-ed column was submitted by Dr. Krystyna Gorzelska, associate professor of chemistry at the University of Mary; Dr. Will Gosnold, chairman of geology and geological engineering at the University of North Dakota; Dr. Katherine Mehl and Dr. Rebecca Simmons, assistant professors of biology at the University of North Dakota; and Dr. Marinus Otte, professor of biological sciences at North Dakota State University.)