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Krystyna Gorzelska and others, Grand Forks, column: Don't let politics elevate junk science

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

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GRAND FORKS — 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. This 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 system occurs when science policy is legislated by politicians, a process that can be independent of evidence and rigorous interpretation. Unfortunately this is the case with the effort by Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to overturn the Supreme Court's Endangerment Finding.

On April 2, 2007, the 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 December 7, 2009, the EPA issued its final findings. Based on the work and research of thousands of scientists, the agency determined 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.

But now, after years of study by thousands of scientists, 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 also would "substantially erode" new clean-car standards that the major U.S. automakers, the United Auto Workers and states support, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. These clean-car standards greatly would reduce our dependence on foreign oil and improve our nation's quality of life.

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

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 such as this that has led more than two dozen scientists here in North Dakota to sign a statement of principles that declare, "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."

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. Murkowski's motives may very well be rooted in her attempt to prevent the scope of government regulation from growing out of control.

But 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.

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