



3. **POLITICS: Obama and his aides phase 'greenhouse gases' out of their vocabulary** (09/23/2009)

Lauren Morello, E&E reporter

Say goodbye to "greenhouse gases." Say hello to "carbon pollution" and "heat-trapping emissions."

"We know that our planet's future depends on a global commitment to permanently reduce greenhouse gas pollution," President Obama said yesterday at the U.N. Summit on Climate Change in New York, one of several references to "greenhouse gas pollution" and "carbon pollution" sprinkled throughout his speech.

The president also referred to "carbon pollution" in April, during a much-publicized speech to the National Academy of Sciences, and again in June, in a press conference just before the House voted to pass a broad climate and energy bill. And he's not alone. Top Obama administration science officials, including Energy Secretary Steven Chu and U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, have also adopted similar vocabulary, a subtle linguistic shift in the ongoing climate debate.

In fact, during an hourlong June briefing to launch a major government climate change report, a panel that included White House science adviser John Holdren and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief Jane Lubchenco mentioned greenhouse gases just once -- instead warning about the perils of "heat-trapping gases" or "heat-trapping pollutants."

According to Lubchenco, that's a conscious word choice designed to demystify the science of climate change.

"The choice of that term is intended to make what's happening more understandable and more accessible to non-technical audiences," she told E&E in a recent interview. "You know, scientists so often use a lot of jargon without necessarily appreciating that it's jargon. And 'heat-trapping pollution' calls a spade a spade, essentially. It says what it is, but in a way that is less jargony."

One of the problems the Obama administration and other governments pushing policies to contain climate change are having is that while their goal is to change public behavior, their message doesn't seem to be getting through. A series of recent focus groups conducted by England's Institute for Public Policy Research, a nonpartisan think tank, concluded that "climate change-related communications, products and policies are leaving most people unengaged and switched off."

The think tank found that while people are concerned about climate change, their concerns don't translate into political action. As one interviewee put it: Climate change "is one of those things you think about for a few minutes, get depressed, and move on to the next."

Repeated polls in the United States show roughly the same result: People say they care about climate change, but when they are asked to rank the intensity of their concerns about a variety of issues, climate change usually falls to the bottom of the scale. Some administration experts worry that jargon like "greenhouse gases" may be obscuring the severity of climate change. Their effort certainly isn't the first attempt to manipulate the debate with a language adjustment.

A new chapter opens in eco-speak

During the early years of the Bush administration, a memo by Republican pollster Frank Luntz made a splash when it advised Republicans to change the vocabulary of environmental policy to marshal public opinion.

"Climate change' is less frightening than 'global warming,'" the Luntz memo concluded. "As one focus group participant noted, climate change 'sounds like you're going from Pittsburgh to Fort Lauderdale.' While global warming has catastrophic connotations attached to it, climate change suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge."

More recently, the Obama administration has framed its climate policy as increasing "clean energy" development, a strategy endorsed by Democratic pollsters. "Voters are more energized around the energy debate than the climate change debate," concludes a recent report by public relations firm ecoAmerica, summarizing research by Democratic pollster Celinda Lake and Emory University psychology professor Drew Westen.

The ecoAmerica report also notes that linking climate change to pollution is a "strong approach."

It's a concept people more readily understand, said Edward Maibach, director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University.

"The word 'pollution' is more concrete to people than the term 'greenhouse gases,'" he said. "There's a fair amount of research showing that people don't understand the phrase 'greenhouse gas' very well. 'Heat-trapping pollution' is a very good, concrete way to express what's going on with climate change."

It doesn't hurt that Americans usually list air and water pollution as a top environmental concern, said Matt Nisbet, a professor of communication at American University.

In blunter terms, experts said, it's the difference between visualizing smokestacks and flowers.

"A greenhouse sounds like a good thing," said Susan Hassol, an editor who has helped scientists write several major U.S. government and international climate reports. "It's nice, warm, growing pretty flowers."

Does changing words really change the debate?

In contrast, swapping "heat trapping" for "greenhouse" helps people picture the mechanism that causes climate change, she said.

"This is a type of transition in language that you want," Nisbet said. "It's more personally relevant and more scientifically accurate than the term 'greenhouse gas.' ... It's an example of the type of change that can change the debate."

That doesn't mean that the familiar "greenhouse gases" is going away anytime soon. Searching Google for "greenhouse gas," for example, produces more than 8.6 million Web pages that employ the phrase. Searching for "heat-trapping pollution" produces a mere 534,000 hits, and for "heat-trapping pollutants" and "carbon pollution" even fewer, at 141,000 and 245,000, respectively.

And as with everything related to climate, the word wars produce their own skeptics.

Myron Ebell, director of energy and global warming policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, told E&E that "the cleverest thing that the global warming alarmists have done is to categorize carbon dioxide emissions as pollution, because it's not true."

Ebell is no stranger to the power of words in the climate debate. In 2006, in advance of the release of Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth," CEI ran television ads with this memorable tagline: "Carbon dioxide. They call it pollution. We call it life."

But in the end, he said, a different linguistic tussle -- "cap and trade" versus "cap and tax" -- may prove more important as Democrats try to shepherd their climate policy through Congress.

"Imagery has taken over in politics," Ebell said. "Because of polling and focus groups, it's being used to invade our vocabulary."

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