

Recollection of meeting with Mike Thompson about Climate Change

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Mar 27, 2008, and updated Apr 3.

The morning of March 26th, I met with Congressman Mike Thompson, who represents District 1 in the U.S. House of Representatives. I was with Ellen and David Drell, also from Willits, and we met at the Solar Living Institute in Hopland. Mike and his two aides, Heidi Dickerson and Anne Warden were touring SLI and we entered a classroom “yurt” where a set of tables were set in a square. Also in the room were SLI/Real Goods employees Lindsay Dailey and Doron Amiran, and the founder John Schaeffer.

The following is what I recall from the meeting. The exact flow of the conversation may not be captured, but I believe this does account for most of what was said. I am not providing any direct quotes, only a summary of the meaning of the conversations.

I sat opposite Thompson and began the meeting by explaining why we were together. We wanted him to make climate change the central theme of his campaign and future policy work. We want him to treat climate change as a true state of emergency in recognition of the latest science.

I handed him some letters from people in Willits who also urged him to be a leader on this issue. I told him the letters showed that people were willing to make sacrifices to do what it takes to solve the problem. We recognize that even though we may be able to purchase products from places like Real Goods, take classes from SLI that help us adjust our own lifestyles that this was a social problem and required government action. John Schaeffer agreed. Then I reviewed the science.

2007 was a dramatic year for our understanding of the climate system. Arctic ice was melting “100 years ahead of schedule” risking major ice sheet losses and rapid ocean rise, as well as spawning more rapid thaw of permafrost which would lead to a greater release of greenhouse gases. The situation was becoming extremely dangerous and could spin out of control quickly unless corrective actions were taken. These include possible geo-engineering the atmosphere above the Arctic Ocean using cooling aerosol sprays, sequestering carbon by managing agricultural, forestry and ocean systems, and certainly rapidly eliminating fossil fuels as an energy source.

I further pointed out that the most progressive policies of governments are to limit greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations to 450 ppm CO₂ equivalent, but that recent work by the lab of James Hansen indicates this would lead to an ice free world in which oceans rise by 80 meters (ca. 250 ft), most terrestrial ecosystems die, and the ocean surfaces become predominantly lifeless because cold water upwelling can't occur. All these outcomes are totally unacceptable, of course. Mike said the salmon collapse may be due to changes already happening with weakening of ocean upwelling.

Hansen's lab studies climate history, and through this they have estimated the sensitivity of the climate system to GHG forcings. Most models only account for "fast feedback" in the climate system, such as the heat trapped by GHGs and surface and water vapor albedo, but the "slow feedbacks" are just as strong in the long run. Therefore, the effects of GHGs on temperature have been under-estimated by about 50%. This is recent information not included in the IPCC report since that report only considers research published by 2004.

Mike noted that the current President doesn't even ask people to make sacrifices during war time. I likened what needs to happen as going from a peace to a wartime economy where we do whatever is necessary to succeed, including asking people to change. During WWII General Motors was asked to make tanks. They said, fine, we can build new factories and make tanks in two years. That wasn't good enough and the government directed them to use their car factories to make tanks, which they did, and practically no cars were made for a couple of years during the war. The U.S. economy went from 1% of GDP to the military before the war to about 40% in a couple of years, which led to full employment. We need to do the same sort of rapid transition but for green jobs. The SLI staff re-enforced this point—see this as an opportunity to create great new jobs doing meaningful work and solving many problems at the same time.

By contrast to most government targets, the report Climate Code Red reviews the case for reducing GHG levels to 320 ppm in order to stabilize the climate. Our chief limitation right now is time. We do not believe this is a task that can be accomplished in a business of usual political or business environment in which traditional government incentives and shifts in business practices permit a slow adjustment. Climate change needs to be viewed as an immediate threat to our lives, a situation of mortal peril in which we make the changes necessary because failure is not an option.

Mike listened carefully and indicated that he took the situation very seriously, noting changes to his own practices as well as a shift in Congress on the issue. He also recognized, via his conversations with U.C. Davis professors, that the IPCC reports were not strident enough, being watered down by political compromise. He felt that, personally, he was more concerned than the average member of his district, stating that if catastrophic climate change isn't prevented no other issues matter. Mike is also obviously frustrated by the situation in Washington. The U.S. president and many members of the Republican Party are out of touch with reality on this issue.

I thanked him for going back to D.C. year after year. His job is certainly extremely difficult and he gets pulled in so many directions. We are obviously asking a great deal of him right now too. Since the Reagan era the mantra has been to deregulate, "starve the beast," and talk about a stronger role for government is currently difficult. We recognize that a new President is required, but suggested that much could be done to prepare for next January. For one thing, we will work to educate members of his district about this issue so he doesn't feel so far "ahead of the curve." Anyone ahead of the curve today won't be so for long, we added, since events on the ground are changing people's attitudes quickly.

Mike said that he polls his district members and 70-80% are concerned about climate change. So the problem may not be District 1, but other parts of the country. I noted that recent national polls give similar numbers.

To be prepared for the next President, we suggested that Mike could join the Climate Change Caucus and begin partnering with his cohorts to get ready for the policy changes needed <http://www.house.gov/olver/climatechange/index.html>

He is a cosponsor of the Climate Stewardship Act, H.R. 759, which we briefly mentioned, and said that future federal funding of any project needs to account for greenhouse gas emissions and either eliminate or offset them as part of the project. John Schaeffer asked him about cap and trade, and he said that cap and trade needs to go along with carbon taxes to be most effective. I noted that Europe now has some experience with cap and trade, and agreed that more stringent government oversight and taxes were needed to avoid the problems Europe encountered.

David Drell asked him if he would help bring James Hansen to give Congressional testimony. Mike wanted to know what good this would do? The issue is so polarizing in Congress, and would people actually listen to what he had to say? We said that hearing the information directly from scientists is important, unfiltered by the political process that censors science. We also noted that because Gore's film showed dramatic footage of Hansen in front of Congress in the late 80's, that this would likely attract a lot of attention from the media, which would further pressure legislatures to act. Mike agreed to ask the appropriate committee chair to explore inviting Hansen to Congress.

Mike began brainstorming a bit with us now, and suggested holding Regional Field Hearings in his district on climate change. We saw this as a fantastic educational opportunity and asked him to let us know if we could help make this happen.

John Schaeffer said he'd like to have the Congressman back for SolFest and give him an hour on the main stage as part of a day of talks on the subject (with myself as a potential moderator for the day). Mike's aides thought this would work with his schedule.

We finished the meeting by giving him a few more hand-outs, basically a summary of what we wanted to get across during the meeting. We appreciated him for being so good at listening, being level-headed, and working with us on how to best move forward from today.

Afterwards, we agreed that the meeting went well. He was already knowledgeable and concerned and we may have provided some additional information and impetus to do more. The key will be following through on the commitments made during the meeting, which entails work. We hope more people locally will help with that!

Many are cynical about politicians, believing they will tell you whatever they think you want to hear. I don't think Mike Thompson is like that. Consider this.

Later in the day, Mike met with the Mendocino-Lake County Medical Society. Here's how the Ukiah Daily Journal began its coverage of that event:

Mar. 27, 2008, by Rob Burgess

When California 1st District Rep. Mike Thompson (D-St. Helena) stopped by the Mendocino-Lake County Medical Society in the 200 block of West Henry Street Wednesday for a midday meeting slated to focus on rural health care, the first thing they talked about, oddly enough, was global warming.

"I think the climate change we're seeing now is cyclical," said Jens Vinding, a radiologist and society president who has lived in the county since 1972. "I think we need to wait a few more years to see what happens."

Before he could settle into his seat, but without missing a beat, Thompson said he respectfully disagreed.

"Well I won't be coming to you for any medical procedures I might need," he said, laughing. "I don't think we have a few more years to wait on this issue. The good news is that very few people share your view."