

Opening Statement
The Honorable Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI)
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

“Disappearing Polar Bears and Permafrost: Is a Global Warming Tipping Point Embedded in the Ice?”

October 18, 2007

Today’s hearing takes a wide breadth—from predicted declines in polar bear populations, to whether polar bears should be listed under the Endangered Species Act, to melting permafrost and its implications, to the ecological affects of climate change on spruce tree populations. The individual topics are too complex to approach in depth in a single hearing, but the common thread is obviously climate change and the underlying truth that the arctic is melting.

There is obvious value in bringing the world’s attention to the problem, but we may have reached a tipping point when it comes to raising awareness on climate change—we have the world’s attention, the question now is what we are going to do with it. As the diverse subject matter of today’s hearing suggests, climate change can have broad effects that we are only beginning to understand.

But as I have continuously maintained, solutions to climate change are no less complex than the consequences. Our approach to combating climate change can not be short-sighted. We need to reduce our greenhouse emissions, but we can not do so in a way that jeopardizes our ability to meet our energy demands or cripples our economy. Our energy demands are rising and running out of conventional power plants is a real threat. We need to find solutions, like nuclear power, that limit carbon emissions, but also ensure that our energy needs will be met.

We are also facing unprecedented economic challenges. As the challenges of competing in a global economy grow, rapidly developing countries like China and India have made clear that they will not hinder their economic growth to curb climate change. This means that any modest successes that we enjoy at limiting our emissions will be completely offset by China and other nations. We cannot afford to stall our own economic development when other nations will not be similarly handicapped.

Today’s hearing, like the hearing we had last month, is focused on dire predictions related to climate change. These concerns are important, but we could just as easily be focused on dire predictions about our ability to meet energy demands or to meet the growing economic challenges of globalization. These three challenges are deeply intertwined and our solution to them needs to be comprehensive.

USGS’ most recent report on polar bears and sea ice is in some ways encouraging. While the report indicates that both sea ice and polar bear populations will decline over the coming decades, the report does conclude that there will be still be viable

polar bear populations even one century from now. It is also encouraging that as many problems as there are, from the national security implications we discussed last month to the polar bears, sea ice, permafrost, and spruce trees we are here to discuss today, they are all symptoms of the same underlying problem. As we develop and implement technologies for alternative energy, we reduce the threat from all these symptoms. And I am confident that we can reduce these threats with a comprehensive approach that meets our energy needs and strengthens our economy.