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OTA [Office of Technology Assessment] Adaption Study

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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

October 8, 1991

Dr. John H. Gibbons
Director, Office of Technology Assessment
Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Jack:

We request that OTA undertake a comprehensive assessment of how the United States might minimize the effects of global climate change. There is a consensus in the scientific community that, if present energy use trends continue, the average global temperature will rise from 1.5 to 4.5 degrees Celsius by the middle of the next century. Your recently-released report, **Changing by Degrees: Steps to Reduce Greenhouse Gases**, provided a detailed analysis of how we might reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow global warming.

Unfortunately, even if the steps outlined in that report were implemented both in the United States and worldwide, some global warming is likely to occur. Past emissions have already caused a 25% increase in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, which by itself could lead to a significant increase in global temperature. Thus it would seem prudent to begin now to assess the probable effects of such an increase in temperature and to consider ways to cope with them.

As a follow-up to your earlier study, we ask that you identify and evaluate technological options for minimizing the impact of climate change. This study should enumerate the costs and benefits of various strategies for coping with changes in temperature and rainfall. We ask that you assess the extent of resource damage from climate change and the types of research and the time horizons needed to develop ways to minimize that damage. In particular, we would ask you to address the following questions:

What natural and built systems are most sensitive to the range of projected climate changes and over what time periods?

Which systems require long planning times to respond to climate (e.g., forests, water supply, transportation systems)?

What information can more research provide over various time frames to guide decisions about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, ameliorating effects of global climate change, and building resiliency into systems?

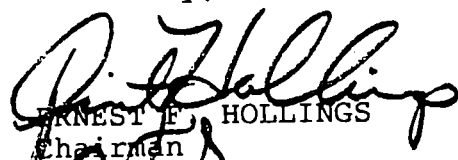
What criteria can be used to guide decisions about management of natural resources or built systems in the face of global climate change?

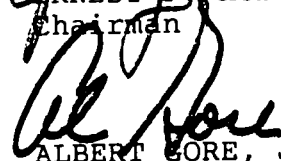
When must decisions be made? How does the timing of decisions affect the timing of responses? What is lost by waiting?

In addition to examining direct effects of changes in climate, we also ask you to examine the costs of dealing with some of the indirect consequences of global warming. For instance, how difficult will it be to cope with changes in the distribution of agricultural pests and human diseases caused by changes in climate? What will be the costs of changes in natural ecosystems and the attendant damage to natural resources (e.g., forest products, fisheries, watersheds)? Clearly, assessing these indirect effects will be difficult, but we believe that it is important to identify and, to the extent possible, assess the costs of coping with these problems in order to assess the full costs of coping with global climate change.

Such a study will be very important to our Committee, which has jurisdiction over many of the Federal agencies which fund research on technologies and strategies for dealing with global climate change. If you have any questions, please contact Mike Nelson of the Democratic staff at x49360 or Louis Whitsett of the Republican staff at x48172. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,


ERNEST F. HOLLINGS
Chairman


ALBERT GORE, JR.
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Science, Technology, and
Space

JOHN F. KERRY
Vice-Chairman, National
Ocean Policy Study