



OIL AND GAS:

Panel's top leaders spar over process and policy as GOP grills administration officials

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Simmering tension on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee finally reached a boiling point today after Democrats on the panel took offense to what they perceived as an attempt by Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) to publicly smear Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes.

Late in a hearing -- which had already seen Issa accuse the Obama administration of deliberately hiking gas prices in order to promote its green energy agenda -- the chairman started to ask Hayes about the lifting of the controversial moratorium on deepwater drilling in the Gulf of Mexico ([Greenwire](#), May 24).

But as Hayes began to explain why the administration determined the ban was no longer necessary, Issa decided to move on, for fear, he said, that Hayes might say something "bad" while he was under oath.

Rep. John Tierney (D-Mass.) spoke up to question why Issa had not allowed Hayes to finish his answer.

Issa noted last year's legal battle over the moratorium and said that "if [Hayes] was going to say that somehow what they ordered ... isn't part of the problem, I didn't want him to have to go any further than that."

The chairman again tried to move on, but that is when ranking member Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) raised his objections in the form of a point of order.

"Mr. Chairman you basically implied that this gentleman may be lying," Cummings said.

Issa disagreed.

And that is when Cummings snapped.

"This is about the integrity of this committee," he said. "I have said from the beginning that I am not going to allow people to come in here to be called all kinds of names and to not be treated fairly. This gentleman has to go home, he's got people watching him. And I ask you to give him an opportunity to answer the question you asked him."

Issa ruled that Cummings' concern was not a point of order and offered the floor to Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.), whose turn it had been to speak. Speier quickly moved to offer her time to Hayes so that he could, at last, answer Issa's question.

Hayes accepted the offer.

"The moratorium was lifted on October 10 by the secretary of the Interior after a series of public meetings in which we concluded that the basis for the moratorium was satisfied and, as the chairman said, the litigation record speaks for itself," he said.

The exchange was the most emotionally charged moment of a hearing that saw Issa and Cummings repeatedly spar.

Earlier in the hearing, Issa was questioning U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson about the need to open up more areas for drilling. Issa was making the point that if the United States did not provide more oil and gas, other countries will, and they will do it in much less environmentally friendly ways.

"Isn't it true that the amount of global pollution will actually be higher if it's produced outside the U.S. than if it was produced inside the U.S.?" Issa asked.

When Jackson demurred, Issa jumped right back in.

"You know we have some of the highest standards in the world," he said. He then noted that the Pacific Ocean had been more polluted by spills resulting from importing oil than from oil drilling.

Issa then turned the floor over to Cummings, who opened his line of questioning with a response to Issa's.

"Let me be clear, Administrator Jackson: I want us to have high standards; I want to set a model for the world," Cummings said. "We are better than that."