Testimony of the Honorable Al Gore

before the
United States Senate
Environment & Public Works Committee

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Madam Chairman, Senator Inhofe, and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for your gracious invitation to be here today, giving me the opportunity to return to the Senate to talk about the climate crisis.

I want to testify today about what I believe is a planetary emergency—a crisis that threatens the survival of our civilization and the habitability of the Earth. Just six weeks ago, the scientific community, in its strongest statement to date, confirmed that the evidence of warming is "unequivocal." Global warming is real and human activity is the main cause. The consequences are mainly negative and headed toward catastrophic, unless we act. However, the good news is that we can meet this challenge. It is not too late, and we have everything we need to get started.

As many know, the Chinese expression for "crisis" consists of two characters side by side. The first symbol means "danger." The second symbol means "opportunity." I would like to discuss both the danger and the opportunity here today.

First of all, there is no longer any serious debate over the basic points that make up the consensus on global warming. The ten warmest years on record have all been since 1990. Globally, 2005 was the hottest of all. In the United States, 2006 was the warmest year ever. The winter months of December 2006 through February 2007 make up the warmest winter on record. These rising temperatures have been accompanied by many changes. Hurricanes are getting stronger. Sea levels are rising. Droughts are becoming longer and more intense. Mountain glaciers are receding around the world.

New evidence shows that it may be even worse than we thought. For example, a recent study published by the University of Alaska-Fairbanks

indicates that methane is leaking from the Siberian permafrost at five times the predicted levels. Methane is 23 times as potent a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide and there are billions of tons underneath the permafrost.

However, there is a great deal of new momentum for action to solve the climate crisis. Today, I am here to deliver more than a half million messages to Congress asking for real action on global warming. More than 420 Mayors have now adopted Kyoto-style commitments in their cities and have urged strong federal action. The evangelical and faith communities have begun to take the lead, calling for measures to protect God's creation. The State of California, under a Republican Governor and a Democratic legislature, passed strong, economy wide legislation mandating cuts in carbon dioxide. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia have passed renewable energy standards for the electricity sector. Much more needs to be done, but change is in the air.

I do not believe that the climate crisis should be a partisan political issue. I just returned from the United Kingdom, where last week the two major parties put forward their climate change platforms. The Tory and Labour parties are in vigorous competition with one another—competing to put forward the best solution to the climate crisis. I look forward to the day when we return to this way of thinking here in the U.S.

The climate crisis is, by its nature, a global problem—and ultimately the solution must be global as well. The best way - and the only way - to get China and India on board is for the U.S. to demonstrate real leadership. As the world's largest economy and greatest superpower, we are uniquely situated to tackle a problem of this magnitude.

After all, we have taken on problems of this scope before. When England and then America and our allies rose to meet the threat of global Fascism, together we won two wars simultaneously in Europe and the Pacific.

This is a moral moment of similar magnitude. This is not ultimately about any scientific discussion or political dialogue. It is about who we are as human beings and our capacity to transcend our limitations and rise to meet this challenge.

The solutions to this problem are accessible, but politically - at least in the near term - seem quite difficult. In practice, however, they will turn out to be much easier than they appear to us now.

For example, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer first negotiated in the 1980's was opposed by industry for fear it would hurt the economy because its provisions were too stringent. However, governments and industry rose to meet the challenge and the treaty was strengthened twice in quick succession to quickly ramp down the chemicals that were causing the hole in the ozone layer.

There are some who will say that acting to solve this crisis will be costly. I don't agree. If we solve it in the right way, we will save money and boost productivity. Moreover, the consequences of inaction would be devastating to both the environment and the economy. Recent reports make that clear.

When I think about the climate crisis today I can imagine a time in the future when our children and grandchildren ask us one of two questions. Either they will ask: What were you thinking, didn't you care about our future? Or they will ask: How did you find the moral courage to cross party lines and solve this crisis? We must hear their questions now. We must answer them with our actions, not merely with our promises. We must choose a future for which our children and grandchildren will thank us.