

TESTIMONY OF REP. TOM PERRIELLO
To the Select Committee for Energy Independence and Global Warming
October 29, 2009

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Chairman Markey, Ranking member Sensenbrenner, and respected members of the committee, thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak here today about the unfortunate tactics employed by opponents of H.R. 2454, the American Clean Energy and Security Act. I was pained to see that so many good, upstanding groups, including seniors' groups and an American Legion post, misrepresented and dragged into this debate. Our Founding Fathers knew the importance of an elected representative body held responsible by the people and ensured that the right of the people to petition the government would be protected by the 1st Amendment. While politics has never been pretty, there are certain lines you just don't cross, like the forging of letters, which must be taken very seriously. I thank the Chair for holding this hearing today to bring light to this important matter and giving it the attention it so greatly deserves.

My office, like many others, received a high volume of constituent calls, letters, e-mails, and faxes in the weeks and days leading up to the final vote on the clean energy bill. It is not only justified but admirable for citizens of this country to be so active in following such a key piece of legislation. I believe this bill is crucial for strengthening our country by putting us at the forefront of a new clean energy economy and freeing us from our dependence on foreign oil. But I recognize that decent Americans can fundamentally disagree. Every member of Congress, regardless of whether or not they supported the bill, should value hearing from those who have deep concerns about this energy strategy, either for or against. That is the solemn and sacred duty we have as elected representatives.

As my office worked to sort through the piles of correspondence after the vote, we were contacted by the Charlottesville-based organization Creciendo Juntos, a nonprofit network that tackles issues related to the Hispanic community in my district. A letter from Tim Freilich, who sits on the executive committee, informed me that a partner with the lobbying firm Bonner & Associates had contacted Creciendo Juntos to inform them that an employee of Bonner & Associates had faked a letter claiming to be from Creciendo Juntos. This faked letter was said to be a mistake, but Freilich, exercising his right of the people to petition the government for a redress of grievances, contacted my office to pass along the information about this forgery. This was the first my office was told of this or any other faked letter, despite the fact that it is now known that Bonner & Associates and the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity that had hired them knew about the forged letter before the final vote on this crucial energy legislation.

After being notified about the Creciendo Juntos letter, my office noticed similarities in the wording of the letter with other letters they had been sorting. Going back through our letters, e-mails, and faxes, my staffers found five more forged letters, these purportedly from the Albemarle-Charlottesville branch of the NAACP. I would point out that the national NAACP organization actually supports the ACES legislation, stating that climate change disproportionately impacts communities of color and recognizing the economic and public health

benefits of the legislation. Since the forged letters were revealed, the national NAACP has said it is “diametrically opposed” to the claims made in the faked correspondence.

Since this time, other forged letters have been discovered claiming to be from other groups, including two wonderful seniors’ organizations in my district – the Jefferson Area Board for Aging and the Senior Center Inc. - and a local American Legion post. Forged letters sent to other Members of Congress have also been uncovered. Forgery and identity theft in attempting to influence Members of Congress not only does a disservice to those who support the legislation, but also to those who oppose it. If Members of Congress have to view voices of opposition with suspicion or doubt, it hurts the opposition’s cause and our national debate on the whole. As for me, I will not change my dedication to listening to my constituents and treating their opinions legitimately, but clearly, “astroturf” campaigns and the expanding corporate capture of government are not healthy for our democracy. We must return to real people-powered politics and a level playing field to make sure all voices are heard and treated equally in tackling the critical issues of our time.