**Senator Sheldon Whitehouse**

**Opening Remarks – Special Committee on the Climate Crisis**

**March 12, 2020**

In June of 1986, almost 34 years ago, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee held hearings on climate change. These hearings featured scientific experts, including NASA’s Dr. James Hansen, as well as eminent chemists, atmospheric scientists, and oceanographers.

Back in 1986, climate change wasn’t on policymakers’ radar, nor did it register with the general public. But the science was already understood. Back in the mid-nineteenth century, scientists established that carbon dioxide is a heat-trapping gas. And by the 1970s, scientists – including those working for the oil industry – concluded that continued combustion of fossil fuels would result in increased temperatures with potentially dramatic consequences for the planet and humanity.

The 1986 hearings, led by Republican John Chafee of Rhode Island, presented the science of climate change – its causes and consequences – to policymakers and the broader public. The senators were so concerned by what they heard that six of them wrote to the Office of Technology Assessment asking for policy options to address the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Their letter ended: “[d]ue to the likelihood that legislation will be seriously considered by the Committee early in the next Congress, it would be most helpful if this analysis could be undertaken without delay.”

Thirty four years later, the ugly arm of the fossil fuel industry has prevented Congress from passing legislation to reduce carbon pollution. But those 1986 hearings weren’t a complete failure. They sounded an early alarm about the enormous challenges climate change poses to society and our planet.

Today, we hear another alarm. Today’s subject is not science, but economics – a discipline that has recognized that climate change poses dire risks to our economy.

The economic warnings fall into two buckets.

One: the physical risks of climate change: hurricanes, wildfires, rising sea levels, extreme precipitation events, and droughts. All are made worse by climate change; and all will damage property, interrupt supply chains, lower labor productivity, and reduce agricultural yields. In Rhode Island, we face seal level rise, which Freddie Mac warns will crash coastal property values.

The second bucket is the “carbon bubble.” Fossil fuel assets become stranded; meaning they will suddenly lose much or all of their value.

Both risks could be “systemic,” meaning that the crash surges out of the directly affected industry to thrash the larger economy, just as happened in the 2008 financial crisis.

Except that experts warn that losses from these climate-related risks could be several times those from the 2008 financial crisis.

Recall the agony of the 2008 financial crisis. Losses in the stock market wiped out nearly $8 trillion. Housing values cratered, retirement savings vanished, and Americans lost their jobs, homes, and nearly $10 trillion in wealth. Global economic growth went negative.

With the warnings come solutions: the top one being a price on carbon emissions – no more polluting for free. Economic and financial experts also agree that the longer we wait to act, the more abrupt and brutal this transition will be.

So we’d better get about it. The natural risks are grave; the human risks are grave; the national security risks are grave; and as today’s hearing will show, the economic risks are grave. We had better get off our butts.