House panel thwarts attempt to throw out creationism law

By JOHN POPE
Staff writer

BATON ROUGE — A House committee killed an attempt to throw out Louisiana's scientific creationism law Wednesday afternoon.

The House Education Committee's 12-3 vote followed 4 1/2 hours of testimony by more than 40 scientists, lawyers, teachers and ministers.

The measure, by Reps. Quentin Dastugue, D-Metairie, and Terry Gee, R-Algiers, would have eliminated the 1981 law requiring "balanced treatment" in the state's public schools of evolutionary theory and creationism, which closely follows the biblical account of the formation of the Earth.

Although the proposal died, a similar bill by Sen. Anthony J. Guarisco Jr., D-Morgan City, has been introduced in the Senate. No hearing has been held.

The Louisiana law, the only one in the U.S., is under attack in a federal suit in New Orleans. Arkansas passed a similar statute last year, but a federal judge in Little Rock ruled it unconstitutional in January, saying creationism is religion, not science.

Arkansas is not appealing that decision.

But Louisiana Sen. Bill Keith, D-Mooringsport, the law's author, said Wednesday that creationism is "a scientific matter, not a religious matter."

His testimony Wednesday afternoon came after three dozen opponents of the law cited scientific, religious and financial reasons for getting rid of it.

Keith, a lay Baptist minister, characterized much of this testimony as "half-truths, innuendos and outright lies."

Earlier Wednesday, an Arkansas legislator who opposed that state's bill called Keith's measure "a piece of trash" and described the doctrine of creationism as "cretinism."

Creationism supporters "only represent a very small minority of people in your state and ours," said Arkansas Rep. Mike Wilson of Jacksonville. "It's unfortunate that these folks felt the need to go to government to force their minority religious views on others - that is, the majority of people in Arkansas and Louisiana."

Wilson also urged repeal to keep
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Louisiana from bearing the financial burden of defending the law and of paying the other side's court costs and attorneys' fees if the state loses.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which has filed suit against both states' creationism laws, has asked Arkansas to pay $1.3 million to cover the organization's expenses in bringing the case to trial in Little Rock.

Another big expense would be incurred when each parish started to put creationism into its curriculum, said Barbara Wells, the science supervisor for New Orleans Public Schools.

No state money has been approved for that purpose.

In New Orleans, she said, the cost of training teachers, drafting a curriculum guide and buying textbooks would be $1,018,000.

Wells and other educators who oppose creationism attacked it as an infringement on academic freedom.

"Does a legislative group have the right to interpret what is and is not science or have the right to force a balance between the material world and the supernatural?" she said.

But the five anti-repeal witnesses who followed Keith said the balanced treatment law is the best way to guarantee academic freedom because it ensures that students will get several points of view.

By enacting the law, "Louisiana is a shining star with respect to academic freedom," said Glyn Godwin, a New Orleans lawyer who also has degrees in science.

"Creation science is at least as non-religious as evolution science," said Michael Shamblin, a high school biology teacher from Tioga. "It would teach the students facts, but it would offer them academic freedom to differ with the facts."

Testifying for repeal were ministers and a rabbi who claimed creationism would have the effect of establishing a religion in public schools.

The Rev. James L. Stovall, a Methodist minister who is executive director of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference and a plaintiff in the ACLU suit, displayed letters from Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Jewish and Greek Orthodox clergymen calling for repeal.

"Our God is too great and too strong to need the protection of this kind of legislation," said the Rev. Woodrow Hearn, a Methodist minister from Baton Rouge.

Also among the witnesses urging repeal were high school and university teachers of biology, geology, physics and astronomy who said there is no scientific foundation for creationism.

Some read anti-creationism resolutions from such organizations as the National Association of Biology Teachers and the Louisiana Academy of Sciences.

"A vote for repeal is not a vote against God," said Ronald Parsley, a Tulane University geology professor. "It's a vote for reason."

Besides testifying against creationism on scientific grounds, H. Pepper Davies, a geology teacher from New Orleans, said balanced treatment could be enforced only "by a spy system of 'report the teacher.' That has so many inherent problems and abuses that it evokes shadows of totalitarianism."

Despite the large number of scientists testifying for repeal, pro-creationism witnesses claimed that their doctrine is scientifically sound, too.

"If you look at all the data, there's plenty of evidence that substantiates a creation-science model," said Charles Voss, an electrical-engineering professor at Louisiana State University.

Edward Boudreaux, an associate professor of chemistry at the University of New Orleans, testified that there are "445 evidences in scientific data" to support creationism. He cited more than two dozen of them during his appearance before the committee.

While such evidence conforms to the precepts of scientific evidence, it "requires another explanation," he said. "It requires the intervention of some supernatural power outside science. Consequently, we're saying that creation science is every bit as scientific as evolution is. We use scientific evidence. It's the conditions that are different."

Throughout the hearing, most committee members were more pointed in questioning pro-repeal witnesses.

The committee member who spoke the most against creationism was Rep. Alphonse Jackson Jr., D-Shreveport, who had written a repeal bill of his own but did not bring it up after the Dastugue-Gee measure was defeated.

Before that vote, Jackson, who described himself as "a born-again Christian," attacked creationism, saying, "I don't want teachers foisting their beliefs on our children. I don't want them bringing in their anti-intellectual beliefs in our classrooms."

Minutes after throwing out the repeal bill, the committee voted 10-4 to defeat a resolution that would have delayed putting the law into effect until two months after next year's legislative session.