Ninety organizations, including many with an environmental protection focus, have called on Congress to revive its Office of Technology Assessment. OTA was established in 1972 by the Technology Assessment Act to provide Congress with "competent, unbiased information concerning the physical, biological, economic, social, and political effects" of changing and expanding technology. It was defunded in 1995 by the "Contract with America" Congress, but has never been formally abolished.

With all the sources of information Congress has as its disposal these days, its fair to ask what OTA would add. Francesca Grifo of the Union of Concerned Scientists, provides a cogent answer in testimony she delivered to a House Appropriations Subcommittee in February. She describes OTA as a needed filter and translation device, helping Congress "separate the valuable information from the spin." Grifo explains why OTA would not duplicate the work done by: the National Academy of Sciences' ad hoc expert committees, which rely on consensus recommendations and are not always savvy about policy or politics; the Congressional Research Service, which lacks a culture of transparency and does not typically work with outside experts; or the Government Accountability Office, which is oriented towards retrospective rather than prospective analysis and "bound by the rules and culture of a financial auditing agency."

As Grifo puts it, "While the analysis produced by OTA did not always drive congressional decision making, it did set boundaries to the debate, rule out some scientifically incorrect arguments, and help to frame political decisions in technically defensible ways." Sounds perfect for global warming policy, but useful in lots of other situations as well, such as when we decided to authorize ultra-deepwater oil drilling.

(Hat tip: ClimateScienceWatch)