

# **Evolution at center of textbook debate**

## **State board to decide whether books should include criticism of theory**

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Texas will be under the microscope this week in the fight over teaching evolution in public schools as the State Board of Education prepares to vote on biology textbooks that have been at the center of the debate.

The board meets Thursday and Friday to consider proposed changes submitted by 11 publishers. The board's decisions, which could determine which textbooks publishers offer to dozens of states, will end a review process that has been marked by months of heated discussion over evolution.

Religious activists and proponents of alternative science urged publishers to revise some of the 10th-grade books and want the board to reject others, saying they contain factual errors concerning the theory of evolution. Most mainstream scientists assert that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is a cornerstone of modern research and technology.

Board members can vote to reject books based only on factual errors or failure to follow state curriculum as mandated by the Legislature.

"There's a bait and switch going on here because the critics want the textbooks to question whether evolution occurred. And, of course, they don't because scientists don't question whether evolution occurred," said Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education.

Among those questioning the textbooks are about 60 biologists from around the country who signed a "statement of dissent" about teaching evolution and who say both sides of the issue should be taught. Several religious leaders also testified against teaching evolution.

Any changes to the textbooks will have implications across the country. Texas is the nation's second-largest buyer of textbooks, and books sold in the state are often marketed by publishers nationwide. Texas, California and Florida account for more than 30 percent of the nation's \$4 billion public school book market. Three dozen publishers invest millions of dollars in Texas.

A vocal advocate of changing the textbooks is the Discovery Institute, a nonprofit think tank based in Seattle. Institute officials have argued that alternatives to commonly accepted theories of evolution should be included in textbooks to comply with a state requirement that the strengths and weaknesses of an issue are presented.

"These things are widely criticized as being problematic. They aren't criticisms we made up; they're criticisms widely held in scientific community," Discovery Institute fellow John West said.

Bruce Chapman, president of the institute, said his group simply wants publishers to present strengths and weaknesses of evolution theory, and that some have done so.

"We think there's much more to be done, of course, and our proposal to the board is that further changes should be made," he said.

Steven Schafersman, president of Texas Citizens for Science, said there are no weaknesses in current textbooks' explanation of evolution. Publishers are required to cover evolution in science books.

The Discovery Institute has referred to a theory called intelligent design: a belief that life did not evolve randomly but progressed according to a plan. No book on the mainstream market presents that theory.

Although the theory has become part of the debate, Chapman said his group isn't advocating it be put into textbooks.

Samantha Smoot, executive director of the Texas Freedom Network, said the Discovery Institute's arguments are rooted in religion. The Supreme Court ruled in 1962 that the teaching of creationism in public schools violates the separation of church and state.

"It says that the theory of evolution can't explain the diversity of life on this planet and that there must have been a designer," Smoot said. "That is a very valid and commonly held religious perspective, but not one that is upheld by scientific evidence."

The Discovery Institute has maintained that its arguments have no religious foundation, but Smoot disagrees.

"The concept of intelligent design was crafted specifically to get around legal prohibitions against teaching religion in public schools," she said. "And as long as proponents of intelligent design deny that they're referring to God when they talk about the designer, they hope to be able to pull this off."

At least one publisher has submitted changes in line with critics' recommendations.

Holt, Rinehart & Winston has submitted a change that directs students to "study hypotheses for the origin of life that are alternatives" to the others in the book. Students also are encouraged to research alternative theories on the Internet.