As a committee of the Republican-controlled House settled in to interrogate the Environmental Protection Agency’s administrator, Lisa P. Jackson, about her agency’s efforts to regulate greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, a senior House Democrat released three-year old documents showing that the Bush administration’s E.P.A. sought to follow exactly the same course.

The documents, including a January 2008 letter to President George W. Bush from Stephen L. Johnson, then the E.P.A. administrator, show that Mr. Johnson had determined that carbon dioxide posed a danger to the country under provisions of the Clean Air Act. He also believed that the president’s cabinet had concurred with such action during a November 2007 meeting, according to the documents, which were released late Tuesday by Representative Henry A. Waxman, Democrat of California.

The documents recall a slightly surreal bureaucratic back and forth in late 2007 in which Mr. Johnson sent a proposed endangerment finding to the Office of Management and Budget, where officials refused to open the e-mail with the attachment.
That refusal effectively stymied the agency’s efforts to make a formal endangerment finding.

It was not until after President Obama took office that the so-called “endangerment finding” was finally issued.

In the January 2008 letter sent to President Bush, Mr. Johnson writes “the state of the latest climate change science does not permit a negative finding, nor does it permit a credible finding that we need to wait for more research.”

It is unclear if President Bush was given the letter after it arrived at the White House. In the end, the Bush E.P.A. never consummated its decision to make a finding of endangerment, and settled for putting out a notice asking for comments on what it should do.

Yet while much of the voluminous documentation attached to that notice supported a science-based finding that greenhouse gases are a threat to the nation’s health and welfare, it also included a specific caution about E.P.A.’s limitations in dealing with the issue.

So Senator James Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma and a vocal skeptic of the science linking global warming to human activity, responded to Mr. Waxman’s release with documents suggesting that the Bush E.P.A. declared that agency regulation of carbon dioxide would be a bad idea, at least from an economic or administrative point of view.

A post on Wednesday on a Republican congressional site cited a portion of the inconclusive notice finally issued by the E.P.A. in July 2008, which read:

One point is clear: the potential regulation of greenhouse gases under any portion of the Clean Air Act could result in an unprecedented expansion of E.P.A. authority that would have a profound effect on virtually every sector of the economy and touch every household in the land.

I believe the [notice] demonstrates the Clean Air Act, an outdated law originally enacted to control regional pollutants that cause direct health effects, is ill suited for the task of regulating global greenhouse gases. Based on the analysis to date, pursuing this course of action would inevitably result in a very complicated, time-consuming and, likely, convoluted set of regulations.