

Friday Interview: Warming News Always ‘Worse Than We Thought’

Cato scholar Patrick Michaels critiques the government-scientific complex

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RALEIGH — If you’ve spent much time following the news surrounding global warming, you might have noticed that each new report on the topic seems to tell us that conditions are much worse than scientists had expected. It’s rare to hear about research that says conditions are better than projected or about the same. Dr. Patrick Michaels, senior fellow in environmental studies with the Cato Institute, says there’s a good reason for this pattern in the way global warming research is presented. Michaels discussed the issue with Mitch Kokai for Carolina Journal Radio. (Click [here](#) to find a station near you or to learn about the weekly CJ Radio podcast.)

Kokai: You recently addressed the John Locke Foundation’s Shaftesbury Society on the topic “Public Choice and Public Science: Global Warming and the Government-Scientific Complex.”

Michaels: God, it sounds like I’m paranoid.

Kokai: First of all, let’s get into that topic. When people hear “the government-scientific complex,” the older among us might think of “military-industrial complex” and President Eisenhower and his warning. Does this have anything to do with that?

Michaels: Yeah, President Eisenhower, in his farewell address, warned of a military-industrial complex, and people don’t notice the second paragraph, in which he warned of a scientific-technological elite running our society because of the power of grant money going to the universities. And, of course, he was right.

Kokai: He said this more than 50 years ago, and we’re seeing the fruits of that today?

Michaels: We see it today. There is no doubt. You know, the problem is — think about global warming. We give money to things that define themselves as problems. And, therefore, there is no incentive for a practitioner of global warming science to go asking for money, or to go around Washington saying, “Well, you know, this is actually kind of overblown, and you really can’t do much about it anyway. And, oh, by the way, we’re going to survive.” What that does is that cuts off the support.

Imagine if I went to the dean of the University of Virginia — where I was for 30 years — and said, “Mr. Dean, I want study the influence of government on science. I think science gets biased by money that is always given to programs because it’s always worse than we thought.” The dean would say, “That’s a great idea, now please don’t ever bring that up again at this university. Thank you very much. Goodbye.”

Kokai: And if you went to any other university, you’d get the same response.

Michaels: Yeah, I don’t mean to single out UVa, though it’s possible at Duke I wouldn’t even be allowed to speak to the dean on that.

Kokai: Now, in looking forward to what this means for the news that we hear about global warming or other scientific problems, how does that shape what we hear about these scientific issues?

Michaels: It's literally always worse than we thought. You know, the fact of the matter is that every new piece of scientific information built upon a previous base has an equal probability, or should have an equal probability, of being worse than we thought or not as bad as we thought — global warming causing fewer deaths rather than more deaths should be equal probability every time we get new info. But it doesn't work that way. The number of horror stories to "it's worse than we thought" outnumbers "it's not as bad as we thought" by about 9-1. Now, that's physically impossible, unless the previous science is biased.

Kokai: So let's analyze the type of news that people might be hearing. If they hear something dealing with global warming and the situation is much worse than we thought, or it's worse than was last reported, how should they read that, in terms of what that data actually means?

Michaels: Ho hum. Just as if someone tells you that there are more tornadoes than there were, you ought to start thinking, "Well, that seems pretty impossible." What there is is there's better detection. We now have Doppler radar everywhere. We didn't have that 15 years ago. Ask yourself the question: "Are there more severe tornadoes?" [Those are] the kinds you don't need radar to see — an F-3 tornado — they don't get missed. And the severe tornado numbers are constant.

Kokai: How about in just general terms of global warming. We've heard continued talk about global warming for decades now, and does the data show that we've had any global warming for the past decade or so?

Michaels: The surface temperature in most records — there's one that's different — but most records show no ... significant warming since late in the year 1996. That's quite some time ago. We are over 15 years now without any warming trend. ...

Kokai: If we haven't had any significant warming since the end of '96, is there any possibility that we have approached some sort of tipping point beyond which we're going to have catastrophic devastation?

Michaels: Well, it's obviously worse than we thought! That's why we must spend more of the people's money on it! No, seriously, there's no reason to believe that warming won't resume. I mean, you put carbon dioxide in the air, and you will, everything else being equal, warm things up. The problem is: how much? You don't care whether it warms. You don't care whether people cause it. You care how much it warms. You know, I'll give you a hint. You know that saying, "It's not the heat, it's the humidity"? How about this one: "It's not the heat, it's the sensitivity." But what I mean by that — it's not the heat, it's the sensitivity — is that you don't care whether it warms; you care how much it warms. Sensitivity is a measure of how much it warms from carbon dioxide.

Kokai: And wouldn't another issue be, as well, if it's warming, is that a problem? I mean, are there ways that we're going to adapt that would make the warming not be a big deal?

Michaels: Seeing as it has warmed a little bit under a degree Celsius over the last hundred years or so, and during that hundred years, life expectancy in the industrialized world doubled, corn yields quintupled, people's wealth in constant dollars went up a factor of 10 — that's 10 times — obviously, a little bit of warming doesn't seem to be all that bad. I'm not saying that it caused all those good things, although the carbon dioxide in the air certainly had something to do with the increase in corn yield.

Kokai: Coming up this fall, you're going to be releasing a new document — a publication that will help fight this bias toward the "everything is worse than we thought" global warming news.

Michaels: I got really sick of "it's worse than we thought," and, unfortunately, "it's worse than we thought" is used as the basis for the Environmental Protection Agency's regulations on carbon dioxide. I have gone in to the document that serves as the basis for their regulation, and I've taken it apart, paragraph by paragraph. They have a very slick, pretty document. I have a very slick, pretty document. They have 569 scientific citations; as of today, I have 932.

Kokai: We can't show it to you on radio, but it does look almost exactly like the document that you're trying to rebut.

Michaels: Yes. Only "truthier."

Kokai: Only "truthier," exactly. And this will be available in the fall. How will folks be able to get to it?

Michaels: It will be online at the Cato site, that's www.cato.org.

Kokai: We have just a few moments, but if someone hears the next piece of global warming gloom-and-doom news, what should he think about what the truth actually is?

Michaels: I would take the bad news and divide by 10, because the bad news is overdominant over the good news by 9-1. I've actually studied that and published it in scientific literature.