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Patrick J. Michaels, Vocal Outlier on Climate Change, Dies at 72

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Patrick J. Michaels, a climate scientist who spoke out often and brashly against the prevailing view that climate change needs urgent attention, becoming a favorite of climate change skeptics and a target of criticism by those advocating action on greenhouse gases and in other areas, died on July 15 at his home in Washington. He was 72.

The Competitive Enterprise Institute, where he had been a senior fellow since 2019, announced his death. No cause was given.

Dr. Michaels was a visible and polarizing figure in the climate change debate — partly because of his stridency and partly because, unlike many politicians and other policymakers, he had scientific credentials. He held a doctorate in ecological climatology from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was for decades a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia and Virginia's state climatologist, and had published in scientific journals.

He was not one of those climate scientists who presented their research and let others wrestle over the implications; he spoke out forcefully against what he saw as environmental alarmism, in books and opinion articles and in appearances on television news shows and before governmental committees.

His critics said that his ties to the libertarian Cato Institute, where he was director of the Center for the Study of Science for years before moving to the Competitive Enterprise Institute, made his pronouncements suspect, as did his backing from fossil-fuel interests, including his acceptance of \$100,000 from a Colorado utility, the Intermountain Rural Electric Association.

“This is a classic case of industry buying science to back up its anti-environmental agenda,” Frank O'Donnell, president of the Washington advocacy group Clean Air Watch, told The Associated Press in 2006 when the Colorado connection was reported.

Andrew Revkin, who cited Dr. Michaels often from 1995 to 2016 when he was a science reporter at The New York Times, said he was representative of a breed of scientists who went beyond research.

“As global warming and the debates around it intensified, I found myself increasingly reporting on how climate scientists across the spectrum were becoming policy advocates,” Mr. Revkin,

who now runs a communication initiative at Columbia University's Climate School, said by email. "There are ways to pursue what the late climate scientist Stephen H. Schneider called 'responsible advocacy.' What distinguished Michaels, for better or worse depending on your politics, was how fully he professionalized advocacy, including founding New Hope Environmental Services, a consultancy expressly selling 'advocacy science.'"

Dr. Michaels contended that whatever warming there might be was incremental enough that humanity would adapt. The alarmism being brought to the issue, he said, was actually causing people to care less, not more.

"You can only tell people that the world is going to end so many times," he said in a 2017 interview on Carolina Journal Radio. "and when they notice the sun keeps rising, they tend to discount these predictions."

Patrick Joseph Michaels was born on Feb. 15, 1950, in Berwyn, Ill., to Joseph and Cecelia Michaels. Before earning his Ph.D., he received degrees in biology and plant ecology at the University of Chicago.

He became Virginia's climatologist in 1980, a position that carried with it teaching duties at the University of Virginia and brought him a lot of questions that had nothing to do with climate change. As he told The Daily Progress of Charlottesville, Va., in 1991, an insurance company might call wanting to know if the ground was really frozen on the date that a customer claimed she slipped on ice, or whether it was really raining on the date of a particular car accident.

"I've testified before Congress four times, been before courts more than 20 times and answered about 20 calls per day from people who want to know what the weather was on a particular day," he said.

Dr. Michaels began speaking out on environmental matters more than 40 years ago. He was concerned, he said, that alarmism would lead to hastily formulated policies and programs that would do more harm than good.

"Our policy should be commensurate with the state of our scientific knowledge," he told the House energy and power subcommittee in 1989.

He didn't deny that the planet might be warming. But he questioned whether human interventions would make much difference, and he challenged models that projected imminent global calamity.

"An expensive (read \$6 trillion) attempt to prevent an effective doubling of CO₂ will almost certainly fail, and at best will slow it down a few years," he wrote in a 1990 opinion article in USA Today. "If we go down this road, we therefore may face (1) an impoverished world waiting for a warming that never occurs or (2) a world too poor to adapt to a climate disaster."

If Dr. Michaels tried to undermine others' findings on climate change, his critics returned the favor, attacking his interpretations of data and his conclusions. In 2013 the progressive news site Think Progress ran an article with the headline "Patrick Michaels: Cato's Climate Expert Has

History of Getting It Wrong,” cataloging assorted predictions and pronouncements he had made that didn’t hold up. For instance, in a 2001 article in *The Washington Times*, Dr. Michaels wrote that hybrid cars were a doomed experiment.

Companies like Toyota, which had introduced the Prius in 1997, “were in the process of finding out that gas is so inexpensive in this country (despite its 40 cents per gallon tax) that no one except die-hard technophiles and hyper-greens are willing to shell out several thousand dollars extra for a hybrid,” Dr. Michaels wrote.

Dr. Michaels wrote or co-wrote a number of books, including “Meltdown: The Predictable Distortion of Global Warming by Scientists, Politicians and the Media” (2004) and, with Paul C. Knappenberger, “Lukewarming: The New Climate Science That Changes Everything” (2016). In the preface to “Climate of Extremes: Global Warming Science They Don’t Want You to Know,” a 2009 book he wrote with Robert C. Balling Jr., he explained his decision at about that time to leave the climatologist job and the university. He said that the governor of Virginia, Tim Kaine, was muzzling him, and that other state climatologists who were questioning climate change dogma were feeling similar pressures.

“What is so scary that some governors don’t want you to know it?” he wrote. “Apparently it is this: The world is not coming to an end because of global warming. Further, we don’t really have the means to significantly alter the temperature trajectory of the planet.”

Dr. Michaels’s marriage to Erika Kancler ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Rachel Schwartz; two brothers, Robert and Tom; and two children from his first marriage, Erika and Robert Michaels.