

The Self-Interest in Climate ‘Denial’

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Even in the face of new scientific reports on the escalating dangers from global warming, the “deniers” continue to pick at the now overwhelming data and pick up their checks from oil and other industry groups, write Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Just as Sunday’s big People’s Climate March and next week’s UN global summit on climate converge in New York City, the nation and world are experiencing weather of an intensity that should rattle the stubborn false convictions of even the most fervent climate change denier.

Terrible flooding in India and Pakistan, the worst in more than a century, with heavy monsoon rains, 500 lives lost and hundreds of thousands left stranded... thousands of wildfires ignited by severe drought in California and the West... flashfloods in Arizona... the punch of a hurricane pounding Mexico’s Baja coast, the strongest in nearly 50 years, battering locals and trapping tourists in their hotels without electricity.

We know it’s important not to confuse day-to-day weather patterns with climate, which measure variations of things like temperatures and humidity over long periods of time, but it’s clear that these disasters are made more powerful by global warming. The pain is only going to get worse for us and for future generations, unless we act now. Our governments must reduce those carbon emissions that are heating up the atmosphere before it’s too late. But up to now, world leaders have refused to give global warming the crisis treatment that’s needed, even as the evidence mounts day by day. A draft report from the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that the vast amounts of greenhouse gases being released into the atmosphere will have “severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts,” and that we’re already seeing the effect in heat waves, floods and rising sea levels.

Another UN report, this one from the World Meteorological Organization, says that amounts of carbon dioxide — the gas that traps heat in our atmosphere — are increasing even faster than scientists predicted, more than in the last 800,000 years at least.

The accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers has crunched the numbers and spots an “unmistakable trend” that puts us just 20 years away from catastrophe. “In a highly globalized

economy,” they write, “no country is likely to be spared as the impacts of climate change ripple around the world...”

If for some reason you don't believe the scientists and the accountants, listen to the birds. Last week, the National Audubon Society reported that of some 650 bird species studied in the United States and Canada, “more than half are ... at risk from global warming.” The study's chief author, Gary Langham, told *The New York Times*, “The notion that we can have a future that looks like what our grandparents experienced, with the birds they had, is unlikely.” Imagine a world without birdsong.

But climate change deniers persist in telling us it just ain't so, like the tobacco industry claiming for decade after decade that nicotine wasn't addictive or that cigarettes couldn't kill you. It's been more than a decade since Oklahoma Republican James Inhofe, once chair of the U.S. Senate's committee on the environment and public works, told us that “man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” He still says he thinks so and so do many of his allies.

Slick public relations and advertising campaigns are underwritten to fool the public and smear the truth-tellers. Foundations and think tanks have been created by industry just to create doubt and hammer away against the overwhelming evidence of climate disruption.

Last year, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported that between 2002 and 2010, via two right-wing groups, Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, billionaires had given nearly \$120 million to more than 100 anti-climate change groups. And the progressive Center for Media and Democracy revealed that a web of right-wing think tanks called the State Policy Network, affiliated with the notorious American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and funded to the tune of \$83 million by companies including Facebook, AT&T and Microsoft, was pushing a hard-right agenda that includes opposition to climate change rules and regulations.

A new study from two groups, Forecast the Facts Action and the SumOfUs.org, says that since 2008, businesses have given campaign contributions to the 160 members of Congress who have rejected climate change that amount to more than \$640 million. That includes Google, eBay, Ford and UPS; in fact, 90 percent of the cash came from outside the fossil-fuel industry.

Many of the naysayers are not in total denial; they either say climate change is happening more slowly than we think — the so-called “lukewarmers” — or they insist that global warming actually is good for you!

Here's a headline from the conservative Heartland Institute: “Benefits of Global Warming Greatly Exceed Costs, New Study Says.”

And here's a statement responding to that new UN report on carbon dioxide from Chip Knappenberger, assistant director of the Cato Institute's Center for the Study of Science. Cato has received funding from the Koch brothers — much of whose billions have come from fossil fuels — and Exxon Mobil.

We should, Knappenberger said, be proud of those greenhouse gases and “applaud our progress in energy expansion around the world,” and he noted a previous statement of his in which he exulted that the rise in carbon dioxide “is cause for celebration.”

Much of this has little to do with the reality of science, some has to do with fundamentalist religious beliefs but most has to do with, you guessed it, money and politics. A study by the journal *Climatic Change* finds that the more wealthy Republicans are, the more likely they are to think that rising global temperatures are non-existent or no big deal.

After all, the industries that are causing the problem — especially anything to do with the extraction or use of fossil fuels — are making them filthy rich. And many of them actually believe further climate change could be good for business. Those melting icecaps and glaciers are opening up waterways in the north, you see.

And the defense contractor Raytheon Industries sees big profit opportunities because “climate change may cause humanitarian disasters, contribute to political violence and undermine weak governments.” We’re not making this up.

So intense is the political and corporate opposition to the concept of manmade climate change — despite a majority of Americans who accept it as reality — that some of the more rational officeholders and local governments quietly are trying to work around the resistance, preparing for the worst without mentioning the dreaded words climate change or global warming.

In Grand Haven, Michigan, AP reports, officials are preparing for heat waves and storm erosion without saying anything about you-know-what. In Florida, communities are taking steps to protect towns against rising sea levels without getting into a fight over what’s causing them. In Tulsa, Oklahoma — where Senator Jim Inhofe used to be mayor — flood control and drought prevention are sought in the name not of warming but of disaster preparedness.

Meanwhile, some of the media finally are coming around, catching up with public opinion. Once enslaved to the notion of having to give equal weight to both sides despite the overwhelming evidence supporting climate change, they’re changing their tune.

A few months ago, the independent BBC Trust said that the British broadcaster was giving “undue attention to marginal opinion” when it came to airtime for climate deniers and should adjust accordingly. *The Los Angeles Times* announced it would no longer print climate change denial letters to the editor – contrast that with Rupert Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal*, which last year ran more anti-climate change letters than any other major newspaper.

And last month, *The Washington Post*, long criticized for the space given such climate deniers as columnist George Will, ran a week’s worth of climate change editorials, declaring, in the words of its editorial page editor, “an existential threat to the planet.”

So we have to ask, how long will we allow the climate deniers the prominence and weight that lets them give our political leaders cover to run and hide from reality?

Two men in Massachusetts decided: No longer. This past May, they used their lobster boat – the *Henry David T.*, as in Henry David Thoreau – to block a coal freighter from docking at a Massachusetts power station. They turned themselves in and faced charges that could have resulted in two years in jail and thousands of dollars in fines.

But last week, the local district attorney, Sam Sutter, stood on the courthouse steps and announced that he had dropped the criminal charges. “Climate change is one of the gravest crises our planet has ever faced,” he said. “In my humble opinion, the political leadership on this issue has been gravely lacking.”

He then announced his intention to be at the People’s Climate March in New York.

Pope Francis would say “Amen” to that. “Safeguard Creation,” he warned, just around the same time the *Henry David T.* was blocking that coal freighter. “Because if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us!”

Bill Moyers is the managing editor of *Moyers & Company* and BillMoyers.com. Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and BillMoyers.com, and a senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos.