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In Climate Change, What's in a Name?

By Justin Gillis

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The words are hurled around like epithets.

People who reject the findings of climate science are dismissed as “deniers” and “disinformers.” Those who accept the science are attacked as “alarmists” or “warmistas.” The latter term, evoking the Sandinista revolutionaries of Nicaragua, is perhaps meant to suggest that the science is part of some socialist plot.

In the long-running political battles over climate change, the fight about what to call the various factions has been going on for a long time. Recently, though, the issue has taken a new turn, with a public appeal that has garnered 22,000 signatures and counting.

The petition asks the news media to abandon the most frequently used term for people who question climate science, “skeptic,” and call them “climate deniers” instead.

Climate scientists are among the most vocal critics of using the term “climate skeptic” to describe people who flatly reject their findings. They point out that skepticism is the very foundation of the scientific method. The modern consensus about the risks of climate change, they say, is based on evidence that has piled up over the course of decades and has been subjected to critical scrutiny every step of the way.

Drop into any climate science convention, in fact, and you will hear vigorous debate about the details of the latest studies. While they may disagree over the fine points, those same researchers are virtually unanimous in warning that society is running extraordinary risks by continuing to pump huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

In other words, the climate scientists see themselves as the true skeptics, having arrived at a durable consensus about emissions simply because the evidence of risk has become overwhelming. And in this view, people who reject the evidence are phony skeptics, arguing their case by cherry-picking studies, manipulating data, and refusing to weigh the evidence as a whole.

The petition asking the media to drop the “climate skeptic” label began with Mark B. Boslough, a physicist in New Mexico who grew increasingly annoyed by the term over several years. The phrase is wrong, he said, because “these people do not embrace the scientific method.”

Dr. Boslough is active in a group called the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, which has long battled pseudoscience in all its forms. Late last year, he wrote a public letter on the issue, and dozens of scientists and science advocates associated with the committee quickly signed it. They include Bill Nye, of “Science Guy” fame, and Lawrence M. Krauss, the physicist and best-selling author.

A climate advocacy organization, Forecast the Facts, picked up on the letter and turned it into a petition. Once the signatures reach 25,000, the group intends to present a formal request to major news organizations to alter their terminology.

All of which raises an obvious question: If not “skeptic,” what should the opponents of climate science be called?

As a first step, it helps to understand why they so vigorously denounce the science. The opposition is coming from a certain faction of the political right. Many of these conservatives understand that since greenhouse emissions are caused by virtually every economic activity of modern society, they are likely to be reduced only by extensive government intervention in the market.

So casting doubt on the science is a way to ward off such regulation. This movement is mainly rooted in ideology, but much of the money to disseminate its writings comes from companies that profit from fossil fuels.

Despite their shared goal of opposing regulation, however, these opponents of climate science are not all of one mind in other respects, and thus no single term really fits them all.

Some make scientifically ludicrous claims, such as denying that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas or rejecting the idea that humans are responsible for its increase in the atmosphere. Others deny that Earth is actually warming, despite overwhelming evidence that it is, including the rapid melting of billions of tons of land ice all over the planet.

Yet the critics of established climate science also include a handful of people with credentials in atmospheric physics, and track records of publishing in the field. They acknowledge the heat-trapping powers of greenhouse gases, and they distance themselves from people who deny such basic points.

“For God’s sake, I can’t be lumped in with that crowd,” said Patrick J. Michaels, a former University of Virginia scientist employed by the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington.

Contrarian scientists like Dr. Michaels tend to argue that the warming will be limited, or will occur so gradually that people will cope with it successfully, or that technology will come along to save the day – or all of the above.

The contrarian scientists like to present these upbeat scenarios as the only plausible outcomes from runaway emissions growth. Mainstream scientists see them as being the low end of a range of possible outcomes that includes an alarming high end, and they say the only way to reduce the risks is to reduce emissions.

The dissenting scientists have been called “lukewarmers” by some, for their view that Earth will warm only a little. That is a term Dr. Michaels embraces. “I think it’s wonderful!” he said. He is working on a book, “The Lukewarmers’ Manifesto.”

When they publish in scientific journals, presenting data and arguments to support their views, these contrarians are practicing science, and perhaps the “skeptic” label is applicable. But not all of them are eager to embrace it.

“As far as I can tell, skepticism involves doubts about a plausible proposition,” another of these scientists, Richard S. Lindzen, told an audience a few years ago. “I think current global warming alarm does not represent a plausible proposition.”

Papers by Dr. Lindzen and others disputing the risks of global warming have fared poorly in the scientific literature, with mainstream scientists pointing out what they see as fatal errors. Nonetheless, these contrarian scientists testify before Congress and make statements inconsistent with the vast bulk of the scientific evidence, claiming near certainty that society is not running any risk worth worrying about.

It is perhaps no surprise that many environmentalists have started to call them deniers.

The scientific dissenters object to that word, claiming it is a deliberate attempt to link them to Holocaust denial. Some academics sharply dispute having any such intention, but others have started using the slightly softer word “denialist” to make the same point without stirring complaints about evoking the Holocaust.

Scientific denialism has crept into other aspects of modern life, of course, manifesting itself as creationism, anti-vaccine ideology and the opposition to genetically modified crops, among other doctrines.

To groups holding such views, “evidence just doesn’t matter any more,” said Riley E. Dunlap, a sociologist at Oklahoma State University. “It becomes possible to create an alternate reality.”

But Dr. Dunlap pointed out that the stakes with most of these issues are not as high as with climate-change denial, for the simple reason that the fate of the planet may hang in the balance.