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The Energy 202: Pruitt isn't the first to argue global warming may not be 'a bad thing'

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Scott Pruitt has repeatedly questioned the scientific consensus that rising levels of carbon dioxide from human-fueled activity are warming the planet during his year in the job as Environmental Protection Agency chief.

The examples began piling up almost from the start. Just a month into his tenure, Pruitt said carbon dioxide is not the "primary contributor to the global warming that we see," putting him at odds with the EPA's own official scientific findings.

But recently, a new line of thinking has emerged during Pruitt's interviews with reporters and hearings with lawmakers.

It goes like this: Even if climate change is occurring, as the vast majority of scientists say it is, a warmer atmosphere might not be so awful for humans.

The latest and best example came Tuesday during an interview on KSNV, an NBC affiliate in Las Vegas.

In it, Pruitt said: **"We know humans have most flourished during times of what, warming trends. So I think there's assumptions made that because the climate is warming, that that necessarily is a bad thing.** Do we really know what the ideal surface temperature should be in the year 2100, in the year 2018? That's fairly arrogant for us to think that we know exactly what it should be in 2100."

Pruitt continued: "There are very important questions around the climate issue that folks really don't get to. And that's one of the reasons why I've talked about having an honest, open, transparent debate about what do we know, what don't we know, so the American people can be informed and they can make decisions on their own with respect to these issues."

Brady Dennis, Chris Mooney and I have the full story on Pruitt's remarks here.

That interview wasn't a one-off. Consider what Pruitt has said during his public appearances in January:

- "The climate is changing. That's not the debate. The debate is how do we know what the ideal surface temperature is in 2100? . . . I think the American people deserve an open honest transparent discussion about those things," Pruitt said in an interview with Reuters

last month. He added, “This agency for the last several years has been more focused on what might be happening in 2100, as opposed to what is happening today.”

- "There are questions that we know the answer to; there are questions we don't know the answer to," Pruitt said during a hearing on Capitol Hill later in January. “For example, what is the ideal surface temperature in the year 2100? [It's] something that many folks have different perspective on.”

Although this argument may be new for Pruitt, some conservative and fossil-fuel industry groups have used it for almost three decades. In 1991, for example, the Western Fuels Association funded “The Greening of Planet Earth,” a 30-minute video arguing that more CO2 in the air helps farmers.

In 2001, the Cato Institute echoed the video's message. “The video was right,” Patrick J. Michaels, a senior fellow at the libertarian think tank, wrote. “The greens were wrong.”

Ultimately, **the warming-is-not-so-bad chatter may be warm-up for Pruitt's “red team-blue team” exercise** — a government-wide debate over the science of climate change that Pruitt has pushed for since the summer.

During his most recent congressional testimony, Pruitt came back to the same idea. “That red team-blue team exercise is an exercise to provide an opportunity to the American people to consume information from scientists that have different perspectives on key issues,” Pruitt told Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), “and frankly could be used to build consensus in this body.”

Scientists, of course, have already weighed the pros and cons of climate change themselves. While rising temperatures may indeed boost agricultural yield in some regions, they are projected to cause debilitating drought elsewhere. And many cities dot the coasts of Earth's continents and were situated there assuming relatively stable sea levels.

The fact that the EPA chief is advancing this new line holds significant political as well as environmental consequences: Pruitt is in charge of a sprawling department whose resources can be used to curb climate change. **For now, at least, Pruitt seems to be questioning whether his department should be doing something about it.**