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Global warming debate stumbles over shady tactics

By Elizabeth Hovde, Oregonian columnist

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A lot of people haven't taken the time to study mountains of data or sift through a sea of theories about climate change and temperature trends over the course of human history. Some of us who have dared to scrape the tip of the iceberg when it comes to climate study feel at least two degrees more stupid with every piece of research we open.

I don't mind reading legislation. I get excited when I see a government budget pie chart. And I actually enjoy diving into opinions written by Supreme Court justices. But when I met with a group of climate skeptics last week for a presentation titled "Anthropogenic Global Warming or Natural Climate Fluctuations?" I felt myself fading each time I heard "anthropogenic" and "tree ring proxy." It is a wonder I made it through to our discussion of Michael Mann's famous "hockey stick" graph.

Feeling lost in science and overwhelmed by the available, but sometimes contradictory, information regarding climate change is a common experience for me. (Some of you are nodding your heads in agreement. Others stopped reading after "anthropogenic" and "tree ring proxy.")

In any case, when people feel outmatched by an issue, they often choose to trust the experts. And when it came to climate change, that worked OK for a lot of folks until the publicly blessed and government-anointed experts proved untrustworthy.

I'm referring to Climategate, of course, which involves thousands of leaked e-mails and documents from the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, one of the world's leading institutions concerned with the study of climate change.

The scientists at the center of the leaked e-mails hold the current consensus view of climate change and have been working for more than a decade to advance it.

While their work has enjoyed the respect of various governments and politicians, it turns out that some of the respected and trusted scientists of our day have employed shady tactics to defend the mainstream thought that the globe is warming unsustainably and that humans are to blame. The e-mails and files generated at East Anglia reveal that "trusted experts" seem willing to doctor their data to promote their positions and that they've worked to influence what gets published in science journals.

Pat Michaels, a climate scientist at the Cato Institute, told The Wall Street Journal: "This is what everyone feared. Over the years, it has become increasingly difficult for anyone who does not view global warming as an end-of-the-world issue to publish papers."

Along with trying to shut out scientists with information that questions the human role in temperature changes, the scientists in the hot seat show contempt for detractors that is unbecoming to people of science. Science, as one dictionary defines it, is "knowledge attained through study or practice." Science certainly is not the shutting out of knowledge attained through study or practice by someone other than you who might come to different conclusions. Just ask Galileo.

World leaders just met and tried to pound out a policy for radically changing the way we use energy. They'll continue to do so for months and years to come. And any changes made will have huge economic impacts. We need all the information about climate change we can get.

While most people rightly agree the environment is worth protecting, that alternative energy sources need exploring and that reducing energy consumption is a worthwhile goal, whether the Earth is dangerously warming or not, the public deserves to hear all sides of the discussion. We need scientists who are more committed to figuring out how the Earth's climate is changing and why than to having the most Al Gore-friendly theories.

A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll shows scientists have suffered a major hit to their reputations. A Dec. 18 story in the Post said that four in 10 Americans now say "they place little or no trust in what scientists have to say

about the environment. That's up significantly in recent years."

While scientists at the Climate Research Unit and elsewhere work to regain trust, what the rest of us can take from the East Anglia e-mail scandal is this: We must trust science, not scientists. And our government leaders, academics and the media need to seek out alternative, but scientifically regarded, research more often than they do.

Today's go-to climate change scientists aren't the only ones with the kind of graphs, data and research to share that can make Supreme Court opinions feel like beach reading.

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