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Global warming skeptic: 'People adapt'

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Staccato-voiced scholar and global warming skeptic Dr. Pat Michaels feasts off the hyperbole of Al Gore, and delights in debunking the United Nations' Nobel Prize-sharing Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Michaels' bottom line: "Global warming extremism" has ratcheted a nation's anxiety level to extremes, while warming of the earth stopped in 1997 and has "not declared itself since."

"We live in a world where the wildest, craziest things are said about climate change," he told a Thursday conference entitled "How Do You See Our Climate's Future?" put on by the right-thinking Washington Policy Center.

Michaels claimed: "What you've got is a greener planet." He pointed to higher temperatures causing a growth in the growing season.

King County executive candidate Susan Hutchison, absent from a recent candidates' debate sponsored by Washington Conservation Voters, was on hand to hear Michaels. She heads a foundation that helps support the conservative policy center.

Michaels is a senior fellow in the public policy school at George Mason University. He was previously a research professor in environmental sciences at the University of Virginia, and jokes about UVA's "local snottiness index."

He's also a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, a scholar whose research has won support from the Western Fuels Association and Edison Electric Institute, and an oft-featured speaker at gatherings of coal operators and mining associations. He has served as an expert witness for the auto industry.

Michaels put coal in the stockings of those supporting House-passed climate change legislation, claiming it would precipitate "the greatest alteration of our economy" in the nation's history.

"I don't think climate change is unprecedented, I don't think climate change will be unprecedented," he argued.

And, to claims that climate change will precipitate death, Michaels answered: "People adapt."

Since 1950, Michaels argued, life expectancy in the developed world has doubled on a line of increase parallel to carbon concentrations in the Earth's atmosphere.

The conservative audience warmly received Michaels' message. Still, scientists in the field keep coming out with findings sure to spur skepticism about claims of global warming skeptics.

Two weeks ago, scientists from NASA and the University of Washington produced data from an earth-orbiting satellite that Arctic Sea ice thinned dramatically between the winters of 2004 and 2008.

"Even in years when the overall extent of sea ice remains stable or grows slightly, the thickness and volume of the ice cover is continuing to decline, making the ice more vulnerable to continued shrinkage," Ron Kwok of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory reported.

The amount of ice replaced in the winter has not offset summer losses of ice. The result, according to NASA-UW findings, is more open water, which absorbs more heat, which warms the ocean and melts more ice.

Between 2004 and 2008, multiyear ice cover in the Arctic shrank 595,000 square miles -- nearly the size of Alaska's land area.

Asked about the finding, after his speech, Michaels was quick with an explanation. He argued that while Arctic ice has declined, there has been a "significant increase" in southern ocean sea ice.

As well, he pointed out that temperatures in the Arctic were higher after the last ice age.

"The polar bear survived and the Inuit thrived," he said.

Michaels is a bipartisan debunker. He satirized statements of concern made by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., about robins moving into the Arctic, after McCain and Sen. Hillary Clinton toured Arctic villages in 2005.

While Michaels argues the case for adaptation, other major scientific voices see data that demands action.

"There's no way the world can or should take these risks," Ronald Prin, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Global Climate Change, said in May after release of a detailed computer simulation of global economic activity in years to come.

The projections indicate a median probability of surface warming of 5.2 degrees Celsius by the year 2100.

At a Denver symposium last year, Sir Nicholas Stern, chief economic adviser at the British Treasury, said potential impacts of climate change include "the most enormous, most wide ranging market failure ever seen," plus economic and social disorder similar to that caused by a major war.

"We still have time to avoid the worst impacts of change in climate, but we must take bold action -- now," said Stern, author of a groundbreaking report.

Who to believe?

Global warming skeptics love to talk about "junk science." But they seem selective in intellectual curiosity.

Skeptics might take time, when in these parts, to visit with U.S. Geological Survey scientists who've spent 52 years mapping the rapid retreat of the South Cascade Glacier. They ought to visit with British Columbia forestry experts, dealing with a pine beetle outbreak that has killed trees over an area the size of Sweden.

The Washington Policy Center might break bread with Seattle-based bird researcher Dr. George Divoky, who has chronicled climate change in the Arctic during 34 summers spent on Cooper Island north of Barrow.

Al Gore is an ideal target for right-wing media, which must demonize to exist. As with the Soviet Politburo of yesteryear, these guys love nothing more than to get a Nobel Prize winner in their sights.

The field researchers delivering up global warming's impacts, and the speed at which climate is changing the Earth, ought to be heard out.

They deserve better than to be victims of junk sarcasm.

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