



December 17, 2009

National Climatic Data Center scientists in Asheville unswayed by e-mail controversy

By Dale Neal

Scientists based at the National Climatic Data Center here say evidence shows the climate is changing at a faster rate, largely because there's more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than at any point in the past 10,000 years.

Carbon dioxide is now at 370 parts per million in the atmosphere, explained Tom Karl, head of the NCDC, who presented findings at this week's international summit on climate change in Copenhagen. "That's way above anything we've seen in the past 10,000 years," Karl said.

The projections can be dire, according to Karl. If carbon dioxide could rise to 1000 parts per million by the century's end, as some computer models suggest, average global temperatures could rise as much as 15 degrees, he said.

Discounting the work of NCDC scientists and scientific academies worldwide, some skeptics brush off those warnings, unconvinced that the world is really warming or that climate change is primarily caused by humans.

Scoffers have seized on the disclosure of a cache of e-mails hacked from a server at the University of East Anglia in England and posted onto the Internet. Skeptics say the emails show scientists have manipulated the data on tree rings that chart changes in climate. The e-mails also show the handful of scientists talking about boycotting peer-reviewed journals that printed dissenting articles.

"Climategate may be just the spur we need to open the books on global warming, especially given the draconian remedies its promoters are prescribing," said Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute, a conservative policy group.

Others agree the world is warmer than a century ago but don't anticipate the warming trends predicted by some models. Patrick Michaels, an environmental fellow at the Cato Institute, takes issue with the computer models used by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Michaels says the warming trend is only toward 2.6 degrees warmer by 2100 instead of the 8.6 degrees or higher that Copenhagen negotiators are estimating.

Fred Sanger and other skeptics writing in "Climate Change Reconsidered" argue that increased carbon dioxide may be actually beneficial, promoting more greening of the planet and better crop yields.

But the e-mail controversy hasn't changed many minds.

"It's interesting soap opera stuff, but it has little to do with the facts that maybe some people will continue to dispute," said Otis Brown, who heads the Cooperative Institute for Climate and Satellites in Asheville, an academic research arm of NCDC.

"I don't care what data you look at, it's hard to be skeptical that there is more carbon dioxide in the

atmosphere than before,” Brown said. “If you don't think that's true, I'd like to know what planet you're looking at.”

An oceanographer by training, Brown said the latest worry is how oceans are becoming more acidic as they absorb the increase in carbon dioxide. That could affect the growth of coral reefs and shellfish.

“There are many more changes in the world systems that we need to understand better,” Brown said.

Ellie Johnston, a UNC Asheville senior attending the Copenhagen conference, said she was impressed by students from island nations, which are threatened by rising sea levels.

“They are seeing their families' heritage literally be washed away by rising seas and erratic storm patterns. Their stories of survival inspire all of us to continue the hard work ahead after we have returned home,” she said.

Johnston said students have to shrug off attacks by skeptics. “To be caught up in arguments about the nature of the scientific process is a distraction from efforts to save lives and ensure that our children will always have a livable planet.”

Scientists may largely agree on the problem of climate change, but getting policymakers around the world to agree what to do is another matter.

“This is a contentious issue. If this was simple, we would have solved it a long time ago,” said Ryan Boyle, state climatologist for North Carolina. “There will be costs for some and benefits for others. It goes beyond a scientific issue and becomes a political issue.”
