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Ethics lapse isn't good for climate

Posted: 11/26/2009 05:58:22 PM PST

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Is global warming a fact, a theory or a frenzy of political correctness? The latest episode in this debate makes it harder to answer the question.

Computer hackers or leakers have filched thousands of e-mails and other documents out of systems used by researchers who believe that greenhouse gases generated by human activity are putting the planet at risk. The information confirms opponents' worst suspicions.

It looks like some researchers at the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia have been cooking the books (suppressing data that inconveniently disagrees with their findings), and have tried to persuade scientific journals not to publish articles that take issue with their conclusions.

Skeptics of global warming are outraged at the news. One of them, Pat Michaels of the Cato Institute in Washington, who is mentioned unfavorably in the e-mails, said, "This is horrible. This is what everyone feared. It has become increasingly difficult for anyone who does not view global warming as an end-of-the-world issue to publish papers. This isn't questionable practice, this is unethical."

The e-mails and other documents, either leaked or stolen from East Anglia, were posted on a Russian server last week. The files specifically suggested that researchers were trying to exclude dissenting views from any reports issued by a U.N. group, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Granted, most scientists agree that in the

long term, the Earth's temperature is rising (although there have been cooling trends in recent years). But there are vocal critics of either the theory of warming or the idea that mankind contributes to it significantly. The costs of the effects of climate warming could be huge, especially in underdeveloped agricultural societies, and the costs of trying to do something about it could run into trillions of dollars.

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Even in California, with its relatively mild climate, a lot is at stake, especially in coastal areas vulnerable to any rise in sea levels.

The timing of this scandal is awkward — or excellent, depending on your point of view.

A meeting of 192 nations to consider worldwide limits on greenhouse gases comes up in Copenhagen next month.

Questions/Answers

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What should nonscientists make of all this? Even those of us who are dubious about the threats of global warming can be convinced to believe that it's time to move beyond the primitive and inefficient burning of fossil fuels to generate energy.

This is an opportunity, not a doomsday scenario.

And what should scientists make of it? No matter what their commitments may be to ideology or political correctness, they'd better keep their ethics in order. The last thing the world needs now is scientific evidence that isn't quite scientific.

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