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Violent backlash on against climate scientists

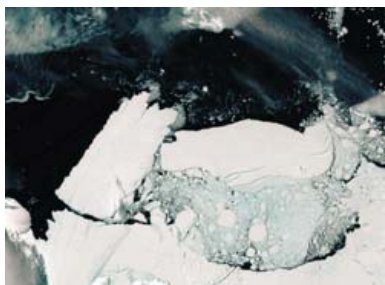


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Science

Written by Stephen Leahy / Inter Press Service/Tierramérica

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UXBRIDGE, Canada—Climate-change science has come under full-scale attack in a last-ditch effort to delay or prevent action by the US government against global warming, experts warn.

US Sen. James Inhofe, Republican from Oklahoma and climate-change denier, in late February released a list of leading climate scientists he wants prosecuted as criminals for misleading the government. Those scientists are receiving hate mail and death threats.

"I have hundreds" of threatening e-mails, Stephen Schneider, a climatologist at Stanford University in California, told Tierramérica.

He believes scientists will be killed over this.

"I'm not going to let it worry me...but you know it's going to happen," said Schneider, one of the most respected climate scientists in the world. "They shoot abortion doctors here."

This backlash against the evidence of climate change and the scientists themselves is not just a US phenomenon. It is happening in Canada, Australia, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, in other European countries.

Errors in IPCC 2007 report

On the surface, this campaign is about a few errors in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2,800-page report released in 2007 and some 10-year-old personal e-mails stolen from Britain's University of East Anglia.

But deeper down, this is the last big effort by the fossil-fuel industry to delay action on fighting climate change, just as the tobacco industry successfully delayed understanding of the harmful effects of smoking for several decades, says Schneider.

"We're up against the multibillion-dollar fossil-fuel industry and the haters of government. They spin and spin and cast doubt on the credibility of science," he said.

The media are an accomplice in this, he said, because they have failed to put wild claims into context and continue to interview people like Inhofe and others who have no evidence or credibility on these issues.

"I'm pretty damn angry that media companies are putting profits ahead of truth. The media are deeply broken...That's a real threat to democracy," Schneider said.

There is no solid scientific dispute over the simple physics that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse-effect gases warm the earth's atmosphere, and that emissions of these gases from human activities are largely responsible for the increased temperatures over recent decades.

There is also little debate over the observable reality that the Arctic ice is disappearing, glaciers are retreating, weather extremes are more frequent and spring comes sooner.

At the end of 2009, documents obtained by Internet hackers from the archives of the Climate Research Unit at East Anglia were released, and presumably revealed the manipulation of data in order to present climate change as a phenomenon caused by human activity.

The event caused a stir, and the researchers who were at the center of the controversy said their e-mail accounts had been subject to cyber attacks and that their contents had been presented out of context.

The IPCC, which in 2007 won the Nobel Peace prize alongside former US Vice President Al Gore, did make some mistakes. Critics seized on an acknowledged error buried deep in one of the IPCC

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reports that Himalayan glaciers would melt by 2035 or earlier.

This assertion was not based on evidence and was "an egregious error," said Schneider.

The ensuing frenzy to find other errors in the IPCC's 4th Assessment Report turned up three trivial errors that in no way affect the report's findings.

Set up independent review

However, IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri announced on February 27 that the nations party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed to set up an independent review.

"Meanwhile, we stand firmly behind the rigor and robustness of the 4th Assessment Report's conclusions," Pachauri said in a statement.

"The report's key conclusions are based on an overwhelming body of evidence from thousands of peer-reviewed and independent scientific studies," he said.

Andrew Weaver, a climatologist at Canada's University of British Columbia and a lead author of the IPCC reports, said, "I think the review is a careful and measured response in light of all the rubbish out there."

The IPCC review will likely be conducted by the world's most senior scientists, appointed by the national academies of science in various countries. It will take many months to put a review panel together and conduct the review, Weaver told Tierramérica.

"I don't know what more could be done to improve the process. It is incredibly rigorous," he said.

Few in the public, including those criticizing the IPCC, have little idea how the organization works. Based in Geneva, the IPCC was established in 1988 to "assess scientific, technical and socioeconomic information relevant for the understanding of climate change."

It has a decentralized structure, with few staff, and virtually all work is carried out by thousands of independent scientists and other experts from around the globe who volunteer their time and services.

Every four to five years, thousands of the peer-reviewed reports and studies on climate are collected, assessed and synthesized so policymakers can understand the current state of climate science.

Governments that are part of the UNFCCC vote to accept each Assessment Report. Only if all countries agree are the findings and conclusions of the IPCC accepted. This process itself means the IPCC is slow-moving, cautious and conservative.

Until recently, nearly all criticism of the IPCC had been about its underestimations of the risks of climate change and inability to keep up with the latest science.

Powerful US corporate lobbyists

But some powerful US corporate lobbyists have been relentless in their attacks on the IPCC for at least 10 years. Oil industry giant Exxon has long funded such groups and even lobbied the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) to push out the former head of the IPCC, World Bank climatologist Robert Watson.

The Bush administration complied and replaced Watson with economist Rajendra Pachauri—the man that the same lobbyist groups want to resign now.

"We're in a bizarre time, powered by greed and fear. The general public is more confused than ever," said Weaver. "And good scientists are saying to themselves, 'Why would I want to participate in the IPCC?'"

No preconceived conclusions

"We enter this process with no preconceived conclusions," said Robbert Dijkgraaf, a Dutch mathematical physicist who cochairs the group, the InterAcademy Council of 15 nations' national academies of science, the Associated Press said.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asserted "there were a very small number of errors" in the 3,000 pages of the beleaguered UN IPCC's last major synthesis of climate data in 2007.

The nonbinding Copenhagen accord brokered by President Barack Obama in the final hours of the December climate-change summit in the Danish capital has the support of major polluters and economies, such as the US, China and India. But it fell well short of its original ambition of a legally binding treaty controlling the world's emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases blamed for global warming.

Dijkgraaf said his Netherlands-based group, which agreed to the UN's request to review the panel's work, "will definitely not go over all the data, the vast amount of data in climate science," but will instead focus on how the panel does its job, in light of the unsettling errors that have surfaced recently.

To work independently

The review is being paid for by the United Nations, but Dijkgraaf said his group would operate completely independently. Its peer-reviewed final report, he said, is intended "to ensure the quality of IPCC reports in the future" including the UN panel's next scientific assessment report due in 2014.

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S. Korea, won	0.0405
Taiwan, dollar	1.4407

March 14, 2010 Source: Bangkok Post/Asyraf Pijornas




The group will first pick a panel of outside experts and wrap up its independent review by the end of August, said Dijkgraaf, also president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Chris Field, a Stanford University professor who in 2008 took over as head of an IPCC group studying climate impacts, said the InterAcademy faces a challenge picking outside experts for the review since "almost anybody who has been involved in climate science has some connection with the IPCC."

Among the questions are: Whether the UN climate panel should consider nonpeer-reviewed literature? How governments review IPCC material? And even, how the IPCC communicates with the public?

No errors surfaced in the earlier and most well-known of the reports, which said the physics of a warming atmosphere and rising seas is man-made and incontrovertible.

Where the mistakes are

But several mistakes have been discovered in the second of the four climate research reports produced in 2007, mainly owing to the use of reports by governments and advocacy groups instead of peer-reviewed research—resulting in fierce criticism of the UN panel's work. See A6

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For example, in the Asian chapter, five errors were spotted in a single entry saying Himalayan glaciers would disappear by 2035—hundreds of years earlier than other information suggests—with no research backing it up.

The chapter on Europe states 55 percent of the Netherlands is below sea level, when it's really about half that amount.

And a section in the Africa chapter that talks about northern African agriculture says climate change and normal variability could reduce crop yields. But it gets oversimplified in later summaries so that lower projected crop yields are blamed solely on climate change.

Mistakes don't undercut broad consensus

Ban said the mistakes in the IPCC reports, found in recent months, don't undercut the broad consensus on global warming.

"Nothing that has been alleged or revealed in the media recently alters the fundamental scientific consensus on climate change," the secretary-general said. "Nor does it diminish the unique importance of the IPCC's work."

That view was bolstered on Wednesday by more than 150 US scientists who wrote federal agencies and lawmakers to express support for the UN panel's work and main findings.

Ban did not respond to a question about how the errors might be affecting UN-led negotiations. IPCC Chairman Rajendra Pachauri said the panel is "receptive and sensitive to" criticism of its work.

Pachauri told The Associated Press in a telephone interview he was surprised at the intensity of the criticism, which he said did not refute the UN panel's main findings.

He acknowledged, however, other errors might still be found, slowing lagging efforts to achieve a binding global climate treaty, since "clearly it has been driven substantially" by the IPCC's findings.

The errors have shaken the credibility of climate scientists and given skeptics of global warming ammunition.

Long-time climate skeptic John Christy of the University of Alabama said he wasn't familiar with the InterAcademy, but he cheered the outside review.

"I hope people like me have input, otherwise it's just the usual members of the establishment defending to themselves what's been done," said Christy, a researcher.

Global warming skeptic Patrick Michaels, a scholar at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, had dim expectations.

"The whitewash that will be produced is predictable, because there is no mention of the problem of how systematic bias creeps into apparently objective science," he said.

The review will involve a mix of outside experts and climate scientists who have worked with the IPCC before but are "far enough removed to be truly independent," Dijkgraaf said in a telephone interview. The idea is to have expertise and insight into how IPCC works without including current leaders, he said.

"The full panel needs gravitas and I think scientific stature," Dijkgraaf said. The members of the panel haven't been chosen, but they likely will be 10 scientists. "The panel will have great liberty to function and work and write a report with an open mind." With AP

In Photo: In this satellite image released by the Commonwealth of Australia, a 97-kilometer-long iceberg known as B9B (right) crashes into the Mertz Glacier Tongue (left) in the Australian Antarctic Territory on February 20. The collision created a new 78-kilometer-long iceberg. The iceberg B9B had broken free from another part of Antarctica in 1987. The dislodging occurred because of the iceberg's latest location and water that had warmed during Antarctica's summer. It has been nuzzling and shifting alongside the Mertz for about 18 years before last month's dislodging. Climate experts are observing the effect of the movements of the icebergs to the oxygen levels in the ocean, and to be able to help them improve predictions of future climate change. (AP)

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