



[Print](#) | [Close this window](#)

ANALYSIS - Hacked climate e-mails awkward, not game changer

Tue Nov 24, 2009 2:04am IST

By Timothy Gardner

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Revelation of a series of embarrassing e-mails by climate scientists provides fodder for critics, but experts believe the issue will not hurt the U.S. climate bill's chance for passage or efforts to forge a global climate change deal.

Already dubbed "Climategate," e-mails stolen from a British university are sparking outrage from climate change skeptics who say they show that the scientists were colluding on suppressing data on how humans affect climate change.

The e-mails, some written as long as 13 years ago, ranged from nasty comments by global warming researchers about climate skeptics to exchanges between researchers on how to present data in charts to make global warming look convincing.

In one e-mail, according to news accounts, Kevin Trenberth, a climatologist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, wrote: "The fact is that we can't account for the lack of warming at the moment and it is a travesty that we can't."

Climate skeptics seized on the release of the e-mails as a game changer. The documents will speed the end of "global warming alarmism," said Myron Ebell, a climate change skeptic at the Competitive Enterprise Institute. He said research that has been relied upon for official reports "is now very suspect."

Patrick Michaels, one of the scientists derided in the e-mails for doubting global warming, said he thinks the documents will finally "open up the scientific debate."

"That's probably the good news," said Michaels, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

But others say the damage may be limited as the evidence is still overwhelming that a buildup of greenhouse gases is melting snow on mountain tops and shrinking global ice caps.

"The issue of scientists behaving badly does nothing to invalidate the science," said Kevin Book, an analyst at ClearView Energy Partners, LLC in Washington. "This does nothing to the U.S. climate bill, which will be decided mostly by economic forces, not environmental ones."

MEAT TO THE WOLVES

Anthony Leiserowitz, the director of the Yale Project on Climate Change, said the release of the e-mails will be remembered mostly as an embarrassment to the researchers.

"It shows that the process of science is not always pristine," said Leiserowitz. "But there's no smoking gun in the e-mails from what I've seen."

Leiserowitz, who is a social scientist, said the e-mails would provide fodder

for the 2 to 3 percent of the general public that are hard-core climate change doubters. "For that small group it is like meat to the wolves."

At U.N. climate talks set for next month in Copenhagen, the top producers of greenhouse gases are expected to reach political agreements on tackling climate change, but not agree on hard targets for taking action.

The e-mails may serve as good gossip in the halls at the meeting, but will not play a big role otherwise, experts said.

For one thing, the researchers involved were only a handful out of thousands across the world that have contributed to a vast convergence of data that shows the world has warmed.

"Whilst some of the e-mails show scientists to be all too human, nothing I have read makes me doubt the veracity of the peer review process or the general warming trend in the global temperature recorded," said Piers Forster, an environment professor at the University of Leeds.

Analyst Book doesn't see it changing the debate in the U.S. Congress where with few exceptions lawmakers have moved past the issue of whether mankind was warming the planet.

Lawmakers reached that conclusion even before the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued an assessment by thousands of scientists around the world that concluded in 2007 that warming was real and more than 90 percent certain that it was caused by man-made gases.

Book said "there are many reasons why the climate bill could choke, but it won't be about a group of e-mails."

He said the climate bill supporters are pushing it as a jobs bill that could provide employment in nuclear and other clean energy industries. The lawmakers will succeed or fail in passing the bill based on how well they sell those benefits to the public, he added.

(Additional reporting by Ayesha Rascoe and Tom Doggett in Washington and Gerard Wynn in London; Editing by Russell Blinch)

© Thomson Reuters 2009. All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only. Republication or redistribution of Thomson Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Thomson Reuters. Thomson Reuters and its logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of the Thomson Reuters group of companies around the world.

Thomson Reuters journalists are subject to an Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.