

Rachel's Environment & Health News

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The anti-environmental backlash is in full swing. Public relations firms and their hired scientists say toxic chemicals are safe. They say the ozone hole isn't real. They say global warming isn't a problem.

Some writers in the mainstream media have welcomed the backlash. Keith Schneider, the NEW YORK TIMES's environmental writer, says the Wise-Use anti-environmental movement "is maybe one of the most important and interesting movements to arise in environmentalism in a long time because they're prying into the environmental questions that we've all grappled with for two decades: Is there really a global warming? Is there really an ozone problem?"[1]

The anti-environmental movement is making special efforts to convince us there's no problem with global warming. For example, a shiny, four-color magazine, called WORLD CLIMATE REVIEW, has appeared during the last year, published from the Department of Environmental Sciences at University of Virginia in Charlottesville. It is dedicated to two key ideas: (a) global warming is not happening; and (b) when it does happen, we will be able to cope, and it might even be a good thing. The magazine is being sent free to all members of the Society of Environmental Journalists. Production and distribution of the magazine is paid for by the Western Fuels Association---a group of coal companies. A spokesperson for the Association told us they put about a third of a million dollars a year into the magazine.[2] Burning coal is, of course, one of the major sources of carbon dioxide, the main "greenhouse gas" responsible for trapping heat and eventually warming the Earth.

Public-relations science, like WORLD CLIMATE REVIEW, is having an effect. The backlash against the idea of global warming is gaining ground in the mainstream media. The NEW YORK TIMES this week featured a story on the backlash itself, which they said is being promoted by "conservatives and industry groups." [3] The TIMES story was 45 column-inches long and the reader had to plow through 41 inches of "maybe this, maybe that" before reaching the main point:

"Issues in science are not decided by taking votes, but polls of climate researchers show that most believe there is a better than even chance that the climate will warm by at least 3.5 degrees over the next century," said the TIMES.

"Climatologists also know that once in the atmosphere, carbon dioxide stays there for centuries; whatever climatic effect it has will not be reversed in several human lifetimes. This may partly explain why the weight of opinion among climate scientists, as measured by polls, is that lack of certainty should not stand in the way of prudent steps to control greenhouse gas emissions," the TIMES said.

The goal of the backlash is to prevent "prudent steps to control greenhouse gas emissions" because such steps would entail burning less oil, gas and coal, and would mean developing ways to capture, store and use solar energy, a technology for which the fuel is free.

While the mainstream media in the U.S. celebrate the backlash and give major play to "maybe this, maybe that," the National Academy of Sciences, the United Nations, and the world-wide insurance industry are taking global warming seriously.

There are two undisputed facts about global warming: First, greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, CFCs, nitrous oxide, and ozone) are capable of trapping heat in the atmosphere, just as panes of glass trap heat in a greenhouse and warm it up. And second: The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is steadily climbing because of human activities. The obvious and inevitable conclusion is that, unless humans behave differently, sooner or later planet Earth will become warmer. Scientists only disagree on the rate at which the warming will occur, and on what the consequences of the warming will be.

The National Academy of Sciences believes warming is occurring now, or soon will: "Scientists have known for decades that a buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could warm the earth's climate," the Academy said in 1990.[4, pg. 64] And: "This principle, known as the greenhouse effect, explains why gases produced by human activity will probably cause the earth's average temperature to increase within the lifetimes of most people living today." [4, pg. 63]

What effects might that have? "A warmer climate would change the probabilities for heat waves and possibly for strong hurricanes," the Academy says. More heat waves would cause soil to lose moisture, reducing farm output. The Academy gives the example of summer, 1988: "In the summer of 1988, the North American corn crop was stunted by drought in the grain belt and productivity fell below consumption (probably for the first time in U.S. history) so that no grain was added to the nation's reserves." [4, pg. 65]

The Academy notes that, as a result of global warming, we should expect sea levels to rise, not only because of melting ice caps but also because water expands in volume as it grows warmer; indeed, during this century, average sea level has risen 6 inches or more, and the rise is continuing, the Academy notes.[4, pg. 91]

Another effect of global warming, the Academy says, will be increased evaporation of water from the oceans. This will put more water into the atmosphere, but the atmosphere has a limited capacity to hold more water, so rainfall will increase in some areas, even as hot spells and drought are increasing in other areas.[4, pg. 83] This will increase the likelihood of flooding in some regions.

For scientists, these issues are of theoretical interest. But for the insurance industry they are very practical and real. It is a stark fact that the three most damaging climatic disasters in U.S. history have occurred within the last 12 months. First Hurricane Andrew struck south Florida last September, costing the insurance industry \$20 billion. Then on March 12 a giant blizzard, which the National Weather Service called "the single biggest storm of the century" swept from Florida to Maine. Then came this summer's flooding in the Mississippi valley, which may yet rival Andrew for the title, "costliest disaster of all." "Taken together, the storms do make one wonder if there are pattern shifts occurring in our climate," says Elbert Friday, director of the U.S. Weather Service.[5]

Insurance companies are doing more than wondering. In the U.S., 36 companies have canceled or limited coverage of property insurance in coastal areas of Florida. Where coverage remains, premiums have risen by up to 40 percent. Some companies have also started limiting coverage in parts of Hawaii, Texas, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York.

The re-insurance industry (companies that insure insurance companies) are taking global warming very seriously, hiring their own climatologists to evaluate the situation. A meteorologist, Gerhard Berz, heads the technical research division of Munich Re, the world's biggest reinsurance company. "The increased intensity of all convective processes in the atmosphere will force up the frequency and severity of tropical cyclones, tornadoes, hailstorms, floods and storm surges in many parts of the world, with serious consequences for all types of property insurance," he says.[6]

How serious could this become? In densely populated, wealthy areas where buildings are heavily insured, Berz says, the loss potential of individual catastrophes can reach a level where the national and international insurance industries do not have the capacity, or reserves, to foot the bill. A large storm with sustained winds exceeding 150 mph striking New York or Tokyo could generate claims approaching, or even exceeding, the total funds available for reinsurers, which currently stand at about \$160 billion.

Senior executives in both London and Zurich believe a complete collapse of the reinsurance industry is possible if the current spate

of large storms continues, or grows worse.[6, pgs. 31-32] Without reinsurers, the direct insurers would collapse. There appears to be little chance of operating healthy economies without a healthy insurance industry, yet failure of the insurance industry is rarely, if ever, discussed in global warming scenarios.

Swiss Re, another major reinsurer, has said, "There is a significant body of scientific evidence indicating that last year's [1990] record insured losses from natural catastrophes was... the result of climate changes that will enormously expand the liability of the property-casualty industry. In light of the magnitude of these losses, it would be prudent to act as if [global warming] is correct. Failure to act would leave the industry and its policyholders vulnerable to truly disastrous consequences." [6, pg. 32]

The truth is, no one really knows what global warming will be like, or what the full consequences will be. The National Academy of Sciences says, "In essence, we are conducting an uncontrolled experiment with the planet." [4, pg. 2] And: "Quite simply, the 'bottom line' of the evolving greenhouse gas buildup is that we insult the environment at a faster rate than we can predict the consequences, and that under these conditions, surprises are virtually certain." [4, pg. 76]

As citizens, we must ask ourselves, is it smart for us to allow the fossil fuel producers, and their "backlash" servants, to continue playing Russian roulette with our atmosphere, our property, our lives, and, indeed, our civilization?

--Peter Montague

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[1] Keith Schneider, Taped remarks during a panel discussion, "Covering the Wise Use Movement" at the Society of Environmental Journalists' 2nd Annual National Convention held at Ann Arbor, Michigan November 6-8, 1992.

[2] Interview with Ned Leonard, Manager of Communications and Governmental Affairs, Western Fuels Association, September 15, 1993. Mr. Leonard's phone is (202) 463-6580.

[3] William K. Stevens, "Scientists Confront Renewed Backlash on Global Warming," NEW YORK TIMES September 14, 1993, pgs. C1, C6.

[4] Cheryl Simon Silver and Ruth D. DeFries, ONE EARTH, ONE FUTURE; OUR CHANGING GLOBAL CLIMATE (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1990).

[5] Friday quoted in LIFE magazine (September, 1993), pg. 31.

[6] Jeremy Leggett, "Who Will Underwrite the Hurricane?" NEW SCIENTIST August 7, 1993, pgs. 29-33.

Descriptor terms: global warming; global environmental problems; keith schneider; wise use movement; university of virginia; uva; society of environmental journalists; coal; oil; natural gas; fossil fuels; greenhouse effect; world climate review; atmosphere; national academy of sciences; united nations; insurance industry; oceans; sea level rise; drought; floods; flooding; agriculture; food; carbon dioxide; methane; cfc; nitrous oxide; ozone; us weather service; storms; hurricanes; snow storms; hail; hi; tx; la; nj; ny; fl; reinsurance industry; munich re; cyclones; tornadoes; storm surges; swiss re;