

Op-Ed Columnist

Global Weirding Is Here

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Of the festivals of nonsense that periodically overtake American politics, surely the silliest is the argument that because Washington is having a particularly snowy winter it proves that climate change is a hoax and, therefore, we need not bother with all this girly-man stuff like renewable energy, solar panels and carbon taxes. Just drill, baby, drill.

When you see lawmakers like Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina tweeting that “it is going to keep snowing until Al Gore cries ‘uncle,’ ” or news that the grandchildren of Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma are building an igloo next to the Capitol with a big sign that says “Al Gore’s New Home,” you really wonder if we can have a serious discussion about the climate-energy issue anymore.

The climate-science community is not blameless. It knew it was up against formidable forces — from the oil and coal companies that finance the studies skeptical of climate change to conservatives who hate anything that will lead to more government regulations to the Chamber of Commerce that will resist any energy taxes. Therefore, climate experts can’t leave themselves vulnerable by citing non-peer-reviewed research or failing to respond to legitimate questions, some of which happened with both the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Although there remains a mountain of research from multiple institutions about the reality of climate change, the public has grown uneasy. What’s real? In my view, the climate-science community should convene its top experts — from places like NASA, America’s national laboratories, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, the California Institute of Technology and the U.K. Met Office Hadley Centre — and produce a simple 50-page report. They could call it “What We Know,” summarizing everything we already know about climate change in language that a sixth grader could understand, with unimpeachable peer-reviewed footnotes.

At the same time, they should add a summary of all the errors and wild exaggerations made by the climate skeptics — and where they get their funding. It is time the climate scientists stopped just playing defense. The physicist Joseph Romm, a leading climate writer, is posting on his Web site, climateprogress.org, his own listing of the best scientific papers on every aspect of climate change for anyone who wants a quick summary now.

Here are the points I like to stress:

- 1) Avoid the term “global warming.” I prefer the term “global weirding,” because that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird.

The hots are expected to get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous.

The fact that it has snowed like crazy in Washington — while it has rained at the Winter Olympics in Canada, while Australia is having a record 13-year drought — is right in line with what every major study on climate change predicts: The weather will get weird; some areas will get more precipitation than ever; others will become drier than ever.

2) Historically, we know that the climate has warmed and cooled slowly, going from Ice Ages to warming periods, driven, in part, by changes in the earth's orbit and hence the amount of sunlight different parts of the earth get. What the current debate is about is whether humans — by emitting so much carbon and thickening the greenhouse-gas blanket around the earth so that it traps more heat — are now rapidly exacerbating nature's natural warming cycles to a degree that could lead to dangerous disruptions.

3) Those who favor taking action are saying: "Because the warming that humans are doing is irreversible and potentially catastrophic, let's buy some insurance — by investing in renewable energy, energy efficiency and mass transit — because this insurance will also actually make us richer and more secure." We will import less oil, invent and export more clean-tech products, send fewer dollars overseas to buy oil and, most importantly, diminish the dollars that are sustaining the worst petro-dictators in the world who indirectly fund terrorists and the schools that nurture them.

4) Even if climate change proves less catastrophic than some fear, in a world that is forecast to grow from 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion people between now and 2050, more and more of whom will live like Americans, demand for renewable energy and clean water is going to soar. It is obviously going to be the next great global industry.

China, of course, understands that, which is why it is investing heavily in clean-tech, efficiency and high-speed rail. It sees the future trends and is betting on them. Indeed, I suspect China is quietly laughing at us right now. And Iran, Russia, Venezuela and the whole OPEC gang are high-fiving each other. Nothing better serves their interests than to see Americans becoming confused about climate change, and, therefore, less inclined to move toward clean-tech and, therefore, more certain to remain addicted to oil. Yes, sir, it is morning in Saudi Arabia.

Maureen Dowd is off today.