



Posted on Sat, Feb. 13, 2010

Many meteorologists break with science of global warming

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The Kansas City Star

We now take you live to a storm within the ranks of America's weathercasters.

It is a quiet controversy about global warming. At least one local broadcaster had been hoping to keep it quiet.

But after considerable persuasion last week, the Fox affiliate WDAF reluctantly allowed its chief meteorologist, Mike Thompson, to explain in an e-mail to The Kansas City Star why he breaks from the scholarly worldview of the causes of climate change.

"It has become completely political — it's not about science at all," he wrote in an e-mail. "If science were the objective, then we would be seeing an entirely different debate. But there are agendas at play, and it has undermined the credibility of climate science."

Others in his profession share that view.

"Global warming is the greatest scam in history," blogged a veteran TV weatherman in San Diego, John Coleman, in late 2007. He then appeared on Glenn Beck's show.

That hardly stunned University of Texas researcher Kris Wilson, who for years has probed the wide range of attitudes, values and skill sets of those beamed into your living room to chat up the weather.

What did surprise Wilson was that 29 percent of meteorologists in a modest survey he conducted took Coleman's side — "a scam," they called the scare.

And a clear majority of 121 weathercasters polled — 62 percent — said they thought climate models were unreliable for predicting temperatures and sea levels to come.

It is important to know that meteorologists are not climatologists.

One group projects snowfall and sometimes blows the call, making doubt and error the weatherman's constant companions. The other group — more degree-decorated, but sound-bite challenged — studies such things as ice caps, sunlight absorption and carbon-dioxide levels to reach conclusions about planetary conditions decades from now.

The quarrels between the two make the American Meteorological Society uneasy. Through education and "more dialogue," the AMS and other science groups seek to bring more weathercasters in line with scientists who insist that global warming is a reality most likely aggravated by human actions.

"The climate scientists tend not to appreciate the concerns of broadcasters, and meteorologists tend to underestimate how much work the climate scientists do and care they take," said AMS Director Keith Seitter. "We're trying to get these folks to communicate with each other better."

Nobody knows exactly how many weathercasters are skeptical of the scientific line on climate change and its causes. Wilson, who soon will release results of a poll of more than 500 meteorologists, calls the skeptics "a vocal minority."

They range from Joseph D'Aleo — who, with Coleman, established the Weather Channel — to a former director of the National Hurricane Center. From WeatherData Inc. executive Mike Smith of Wichita to the 44 TV weathercasters who signed a 2008 petition circulated by U.S. Sen. James Inhofe. An Oklahoma Republican, Inhofe is a fiery critic of climate science.

Plenty of others, including KSHB chief meteorologist Gary Lezak, scoff at the skepticism.

"I absolutely believe it's politically driven," he said. "I'm not politically driven ... I go with the overwhelming scientific evidence.

"The fact is, the Earth is warming up. Far as I know, 90 to 95 percent of scientists believe climate change is real and it has a human influence. Am I able to change my mind in 10 years if the facts show otherwise? Of course."

With the Midwest facing an unusually harsh winter, the politicized research of "Climategate" still ringing in our ears and the nation's capital beneath 3 feet of snow, skeptics brandishing the AMS seal are ramping up their arguments that "solar cycles" and other natural events have caused warming patterns since the 1970s.

Sun activity, measured in spots and bursts, is thought to vary over multiyear periods. Some say that in recent years we have entered a calmer cycle that will deliver cold, snowy winters like those of the 1960s. Others say heavy snows may instead be the result of more moisture in the atmosphere due to ice caps melting beneath greenhouse gases.

The AMS and Congress-funded National Environmental Education Foundation work together to provide science news and online courses to weathercasters who rely on the AMS for certification.

Because of documented levels of trust people place in on-air personalities who seem up on their science, "the future of climate-change policy rests to a not insubstantial degree on the well-tailored shoulders of the local weatherman," a cover story in the Columbia Journalism Review said.

One problem is that not all weathercasters are scientists — many majored in journalism — and unlike the graduate-level pursuits of most climate scientists, meteorology degrees can be earned in four years.

"By no means do I consider myself an expert on long-term forecasting," said KMBC chief meteorologist Bryan Busby. "At St. Louis University, I took one course in climatology."

But what he and other certified meteorologists know too well is that computer models used in predicting highs and lows fail all the time. Purporting to be certain of the weather next week, much less climate patterns by century's end, strikes Busby as a bit arrogant: "I suspect somewhere in the middle of both camps lies the truth."

True, climatologists use similar computer models. But they do so in different ways and for different purposes.

"The models used for predicting weather are inherently volatile," said Wilson, a scientist and member of the journalism faculty in Austin. "The climate models are not like that. They're inherently stable."

WDAF's Thompson laid into Al Gore, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and "cap-and-trade" proposals in a KCMO radio interview in December: "Our kids and our kids' kids are going to be paying for this mess for a long time."

The rhetoric does get heated. Citing the "gravy train of grants" available to climate "alarmists," meteorologist D'Aleo said network affiliates pressured some weathercasters to keep their skepticism to themselves "because they might lose advertising. There's a lot of green money out there."

D'Aleo also accused the AMS of trying to get weathercasters "to evangelize" the worst fears of climatologists to the 99 percent of Americans who own TVs.

While the society did draft a fought-over statement citing "adequate evidence ... that humans have significantly contributed" to Earth heating up, Seitter of the AMS said nobody was urging skeptics to quiet down — but just to "know the scientific background and read the articles."

To reach weathercasters in 125 U.S. media markets, the National Environmental Education Foundation puts out a weekly Earth Gauge newsletter with "climate facts" pointing out, for example, the retreat of glaciers and the northward movement of bird species.

"We're not talking about predictions, but what's happening now. We've found that approach works best," said the foundation's Sara Espinoza.

At weather conventions, passions can run high when a climate-change workshop or panel discussion appears on the agenda, said Katie Horner, chief meteorologist at KCTV.

"I'm not a climatologist," she said, stressing the customary caveat. "But my feeling is, whether or not man is contributing — and I don't see how we could not be — if we can make changes to reduce our footprint on the global environment, to become less dependent on foreign oil, those things would be good for the country.

"My instinct is, let's go green."

The Chicago-based Heartland Institute — a fierce advocate of free markets and a critic of legislation to slash carbon emissions — invites any weathercaster with an open mind to its fourth annual International Conference on Climate Change in mid-May.

"We're trying to group the programs around Saturday and early Sunday," said the institute's Dan Miller. "That way they can get back to their stations in time for sweeps week."

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