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Statement on the IPCC Fourth Assessment Summary for Policy Makers (SPM)

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We urge great caution in reading too much into the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Summary for Policy Makers until it can be compared with the underlying scientific assessment, which will not be released for public scrutiny for several months. Claims being made that a climate catastrophe later this century is more certain are unjustified.

This Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) was drafted by government appointees who reflect the views of their governments on the climate issue. It is the product of negotiation to reach consensus and it is a stretch to claim that it represents the views of more than 2000 leading climate scientists.

The National Academy of Sciences, commenting on the last SPM, observed that it "reflects less emphasis on communicating the basis for uncertainty" and that "without an understanding of the sources and degree of uncertainty, decision makers could fail to define the best ways to deal with the serious issue of global warming."

It is unfortunate that the SPM is being released before the substantive underlying assessment reports which would provide the context, caveats, and uncertainties necessary to properly interpret the summary statements.

This caution is very relevant because the just released SPM conveys a view that there is near certainty about the extent of human influence on the climate system and that future climate change will have serious environmental impacts.

Further, the probability estimates cited are subjective judgments of people who essentially share the same perspective. They are not true estimates based on observational data; nor do they reflect a true cross section of the climate science community.

Surface temperature records over recent decades and projections for the future are subject to continuing debate. The number of surface measuring stations has declined dramatically and the loss of that data may seriously affect the accuracy of surface temperature measurements. Without better, more accurate, and spatially comprehensive global surface measurements and the factors that influence them, the computer models used to project future temperatures do not have the certainty that is asserted for them.

Similarly, without more comprehensive observational data and a better understanding of cloud formation, statements and projections about the future remain essentially speculative.

Although the gaps between satellite and surface measurements have narrowed, there remain significant unexplained differences. Lower atmospheric temperatures should have warmed as fast as the surface and they have not. That is not a trivial matter.

Over the past five years, there has been significant progress in our understanding of the climate system and that has resulted in better climate simulations and better estimates of sea level and sea ice. There is every reason to expect similar progress over the next five years. As our knowledge improves, so will our ability to fashion policies that better reflect the true state of science and the trade-offs involved in policy choices.

While the SPM's underlying assessment documents should provide an improved basis for evaluating the benefits of additional actions, the underlying state of knowledge does not justify scare tactics or provide sufficient support for proposals of the kind of actions being proposed by some industrial companies, environmental organizations and members of Congress to suppress energy use and impose large economic burdens on the US economy.

For additional information on this issue see:

- Shattered Consensus: The True State of Global Warming, (<http://www.marshall.org/article.php?id=357>)
- Climate Issues and Questions (<http://www.marshall.org/article.php?id=391>)

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