

Opinion: U.N. Report Is Biased

By Ross McKittrick

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Jan. 12, 2007 issue - Last Friday, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations group charged with assessing the state of the world's climate, unveiled the summary of its latest report. The IPCC Web site claims an impressive number of participants: 450 lead authors, 800 contributors and 2,500 expert reviewers (of which I was one). But it would be a mistake to assume all these experts endorse everything in summary, including its bottom-line assessment: "Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations." Many disagree with the conclusion itself or the claimed level of certainty, but the fact is, we were never asked. Most participants worked only on small portions of the report, handed in final materials last summer and never ventured an opinion on claims made in the summary.

Nor can readers check how well the summary reflects the underlying science. The report itself will not be distributed until May. Although it was officially "released" on Feb. 2, the IPCC is going over the wording to make sure it is consistent with the summary. This is a curious and disconcerting aspect of IPCC procedures: it needs a couple of months to revise a detailed report prepared by hundreds of scientists, to ensure it agrees with a brief summary drafted by a few dozen scientists and edited by hundreds of bureaucrats and politicians.

To be sure, the IPCC does an impressive job of mobilizing experts to produce a report it hopes will be of service to the world. No one should trivialize this achievement. But let's not make the error of allowing a glossy summary to trivialize the complexities and uncertainties in climate change. After all, if the issues were so simple, you wouldn't need 3,700 experts to write the report. It is a paradox that some of the strongest claims of unanimity in science are made on a subject involving some of the deepest intellectual disagreements and uncertainties.

For instance, the study of climate begins with the movements of fluids: the oceans and atmosphere. The mathematics describing fluids in motion were derived by Claude-Louis Navier and George Gabriel Stokes more than a century ago, but no one has been able to put the equations in a form that would be useful for predicting many key climatic processes. The Clay Institute of Mathematics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, offers a \$1 million prize for anyone who can solve the "Navier-Stokes problem," or even just prove that a solution is possible.

In lieu of a solution, scientists use computer models to approximate how the countless processes affecting the climate might behave over time. The IPCC report explains many important limitations of these models: the summary ignores them. The report fails to achieve balance in other places. For instance, in its 2001 report, the IPCC effectively denied the view that the Earth's climate had cycled through warming and cooling for 10 centuries prior to today's warming. The famous "hockey stick" graph implied warming began with industrialization. I am skeptical of this claim, based on a lot of research—including some high-level expert reviews last year—that showed the data did not support the IPCC claim. The 2007 report admits problems in this earlier view, but goes on to claim that climate is likely the warmest in 1300 years—precisely what the data don't support.

The IPCC also denies that its estimate of rising temperatures, based on weather data collected in ground-level stations around the world, is affected by warming biases due to land-use change, urbanization and the sudden closure of half the world's monitoring stations in the early 1990s. I am skeptical of their position, based on work I and others have done showing correlations between these influences and temperature trends.

There are other examples. Numerous analyses of solar data suggest the sun's output has intensified since the 17th century, and its indirect effect on cloud formation may further amplify its influence on the climate, implying much of 20th-century climate change is natural. One recent study, by contrast, suggests almost no solar intensification has occurred since the 17th century. That's the study you will read about most in the IPCC report summary.

The IPCC leaders have a point of view. Think of their report as the case for the prosecution. Maybe this time the district attorney is right. Maybe not: that is why we need to hear from the defense as well.

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