

Scientists report rampant political interference in climate research

Naomi Spencer
5 February 2007

As the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued its urgent assessment Friday, providing alarming information about the advanced state of global warming, Washington immediately moved to downplay the US contribution.

US Energy Secretary Sam Bodman told reporters February 2 that the Bush administration was “embracing” the findings. “Human activity is contributing to changes in our Earth’s climate and that issue is no longer up for debate.” However, he insisted that the US—which comprises 5 percent of the global population but produces *a quarter* of global warming-causing emissions—was “a small contributor when you look at the rest of the world.”

Far from embracing the scientific evidence of climate change, the Bush administration’s posture of concern is an attempt to placate growing public apprehension without having to implement meaningful regulations on fuel emissions and industrial pollution.

In fact, the Bush administration, at the behest of big oil, has systematically meddled with the research of federal scientists into the issue of climate change, according to a January 30 report from the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Government Accountability Project.

The report, “Atmosphere of Pressure,” was based on a survey of 1,600 climate scientists working at seven federal agencies, along with interviews and a review of documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests. The survey found widespread political interference over the past five years, with 58 percent of all respondents reporting they had personally experienced at least one incident of political interference.

Nearly half of all respondents reported governmental pressure to eliminate the words “climate change,” “global warming,” or other similar phrases from their writings. Two in five (43 percent) scientists who responded witnessed edits during the review of their work that were substantial enough to change the meaning of their findings. Thirty-seven percent perceived or personally experienced statements that were made by officials within their agencies that

misrepresented scientific findings. The same proportion also experienced “disappearance or unusual delay of websites, reports, or other science-based materials relating to climate.”

Among the findings from the documents and interviews was this: A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) climate modeling expert, whose research focused on the relationship between global warming and hurricane activity, was barred by the administration from speaking to the media in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Also in 2005, appointed public affairs officers attempted to prevent NASA’s Goddard Institute of Space Studies director James Hansen from speaking about global warming findings, filtering his public statements and moderating his press interviews.

In many other cases, interviews with scientists were only allowed under the direction of administration officials, press conferences were cancelled and scientists’ press releases were rewritten almost beyond recognition by Bush administration officials.

A number of scientists and advocacy groups testified January 30 before a Congressional oversight committee on the matter. Rick Piltz, a former associate at the US Climate Change Science Program, told the hearing that many of the edits to scientific works were undertaken “at the twelfth hour after all the earlier science people had signed off” by Bush administration “public affairs” appointees.

Scientists testified at length on the influence of the oil industry, whose lobbyists and employees were given positions on federal environmental policy councils and climate information oversight. In one case, a White House appointee and former lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute, Phil Cooney, made over 200 changes to the text of a climate report, injecting false uncertainty and substantially dampening its implications and conclusions.

As head of the Council on Environmental Quality, Cooney personally excised a section warning on the dangers of climate change from a major Environmental Protection Agency report, which he called “speculative musing.” The report notes that after his meddling was made public,

Cooney left his government post for one at ExxonMobil.

Such evidence makes clear that the ruling elite sees climate change research, with its enormous implications for life on the planet, merely as an obstacle to the accumulation of profit and personal wealth. It is also clear that science is seen by oil industry cronies inside and outside the White House as something that can be tailored, suppressed, and diluted to pursue any agenda.

The oil industry has long engaged in efforts to confuse the public and manufacture controversy over the causes of climate change, for obvious reasons. For example, the Union of Concerned Scientists reported last month that between 1998 and 2005, ExxonMobil—the largest publicly traded company in the world—invested nearly \$16 million in lobbying and in the construction of junk science organizations. The company has pledged another \$100 million to underwrite Stanford University’s Global Climate and Energy Project to “improve scientific understanding” and “assess policy options” related to global warming.

The UCS investigation found that these organizations consisted of “an overlapping collection of individuals serving as staff, board members, and scientific advisors that publish and re-publish the works of a small group of climate change contrarians.”

The sole purpose of these organizations has been to deny any connection between the burning of fossil fuels, which results in a release of carbon dioxide, and the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which traps heat and raises the Earth’s temperature. Atmospheric carbon dioxide has increased considerably since the beginning of the industrial age, resulting in rising temperatures, melting ice caps, intensification of flooding and drought and other climatic shifts.

ExxonMobil is also accused of attempting to undercut the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a US think-tank with intimate ties to the White House and Republican Party, has offered scientists \$10,000 apiece for articles that call into question the report’s findings and methodology.

The AEI has received more than \$1.6 million from ExxonMobil, and former Exxon head Lee Raymond is currently the vice-chairman of the think-tank’s board of trustees.

Letters sent out to scientists explained that money would be paid for essays that “thoughtfully explore the limitations of climate model outputs as they pertain to the development of climate policy” by governments. “An independent review of the FAR [the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report] will advance public deliberation about the extent of potential future climate change and clarify the basis for various policy strategies.”

The letters characterized the UN panel, comprised of thousands of scientists from 113 countries, as “susceptible to self-selection bias in its personnel, resistant to reasonable criticism and dissent and prone to summary conclusions that are poorly supported by the analytical work of the complete Working Group reports.”

Given the corporate backing and political agenda of the AEI, the purpose of the monetary incentive is obvious. As climate researcher David Viner told the British *Guardian* February 2, “It’s a desperate attempt by an organization who wants to distort science for their own political aims . . . The IPCC process is probably the most thorough and open review undertaken in any discipline.”

Fellows from the American Enterprise Institute have since insinuated in press statements that climate scientists were paid to conclude manmade emissions were the overwhelming source of global warming. AEI fellow David Frum commented in the ultra-right *National Review* February 4 that it was impossible to know how much scientists had been paid for their work. “I will however venture to predict that if we ever do find out, the amount would turn out to be many multiples of \$10,000 per person.” In fact, none of the 2,500 scientists were compensated by the UN for the content of their contributions to the climate report.

“Atmosphere of Pressure” can be downloaded from the Government Accountability Project website. Documents and testimony from the Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing can be found on the official website. The Union of Concerned Scientists investigation into ExxonMobil-funded organizations is available for download through the UCS press release.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact