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Oregon senator cited imbalanced scientific view on global warming

12/05/03

The following is from a letter that 17 Northwest scientists -- including five on the faculties of Oregon universities -- sent to Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., responding to his Nov. 5 guest column, "Climate bill posed risks to economy." Dear Sen. Smith,

We read your opinion piece in The Oregonian and believe that the reasons you gave for voting against the Climate Stewardship Act included some misrepresentations of the science of climate. We certainly agree with you that "nature is in a constant state of change." However, it is quite untrue to present the

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consensus view of climate scientists as evenly divided about whether current warming is entirely natural, as you did in your piece: "And our understanding of climate change is very limited. Some think automobiles and industrialization are to blame for Earth's current warming period. Yet, just as many scientists point to natural indicators -- from ancient tree rings to glacial ice cores -- as evidence that the planet regularly experiences both warming and cooling trends . . ."

A bit later in the piece, you state: "The Harvard-Smithsonian Center for



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Astrophysics reported that the 20th century has neither the warmest nor the most extreme weather of the past 1,000 years."

Three important points must be made in response to these claims:

On the issue of climate change, more than on any other policy-relevant science issue we know of, scientists have repeatedly been asked to produce comprehensive assessments of the state of science. To ignore those assessments is to ignore the very basis of a sophisticated modern society . . . the role of experts. When someone ignores or discredits experts in favor of a single paper (produced by two researchers at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, not by the entire institution, and faulty in its analysis) that supports an extreme point of view, then it really is "more to do with politics than science."

The most important such assessment culminated in early 2001 -- the years-long effort by 600 scientists laboring under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to produce an 894-page report on "The Scientific Basis" of climate change. This document was peer-reviewed piece-by-piece by several hundred scientists; the language in each chapter was carefully crafted to reflect the state of scientific understanding, including areas of great controversy and substantial agreement. The report's summary stated that "There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities. . . ."

At the request of President Bush, The U.S. National Academy of Sciences convened a panel in spring 2001 to answer "some key questions" that reaffirmed the IPCC's conclusions that most of the recent warming was likely due to human activity: "The IPCC's conclusion that most of the observed warming of the last 50 years is likely to have been due to the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations accurately reflects the current thinking of the scientific community on this issue. . . ."

The evidence for a growing human influence on climate is very strong. This evidence includes (a) rapidly increasing greenhouse gases; (b) a pattern of warming that resembles the pattern expected from this increase in greenhouse gases; (c) direct measurements ruling out solar radiation as the cause of warming in the last 24 years . . .

The existence of past natural variations -- like the glacial-interglacial cycles -- in no way diminishes the likelihood that in the past 30 to 50 years, human influence has also played a role in observed warming. There can be and indeed are multiple causes for climate variations; the differences between human-induced and natural causes are (a) the pace of global (as opposed to regional) change, which most research suggests is unusual; (b) the moral and legal responsibility for the change. As the American Geophysical Union puts it in its official statement on climate change, "The present level of scientific uncertainty does not justify inaction in the mitigation of human-induced climate change." We applaud those who, rather than hoping that the overwhelming consensus of the climate research community is completely wrong, are seeking innovative and cost-effective ways to reduce greenhouse gases.

This letter takes no position on whether the Climate Stewardship Act was a good, cost-effective policy; rather, we are grieved to see members of the most august legislative body in the world citing a tiny

minority of climate researchers in constructing an imbalanced view of the state of science, rather than relying on expert knowledge as represented in the comprehensive assessment efforts of the IPCC and the National Academy of Sciences.

RICHARD GAMMON, professor of oceanography and chemistry,
University of Washington (and 16 cosigners from Northwest universities)

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