

The Realist's View is that It's Time to Buy Insurance Against Global Warming

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Article:

Is global warming a reality or not?

That question has swirled through the scientific and government communities in recent years, with greenhouse doomsayers competing with greenhouse optimists for the public's and Congress's attention. The doomsayers paint bleak pictures of inundated coastal regions and sun-burnt crops, while the optimists argue that recent variations in global temperatures are within historical bounds and hence do not necessarily imply a warming trend.

We need more scientific evidence before we can conclude that global warming is a reality, the optimists claim. A recent letter to the News & Record suggested that to claim otherwise is "didactic puffery."

The assertions of the optimists are correct, as far as they go. It's true that by themselves, the data on worldwide temperatures are consistent with a variety of hypotheses, including the claim that we are simply warming up in an interglacial period. Over the eons, the Earth has alternately warmed up and cooled down, the result of myriad natural processes that govern the Earth's climate.

But we're not talking about natural processes when we talk about the risk of excessive global warming. We know that carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases are building up in the atmosphere, and we understand the physical mechanism by which this buildup leads to the retention of solar energy.

Simply saying that we don't have firm evidence of global warming does not help us devise a sound policy in the face of the very real risk of global warming, and in fact it hinders intelligent policy-making by emboldening the Rush Li mbaughs of the world, who latch onto and misinterpret any subtle disagreements among the experts.

All this talk of evidence is (almost) beside the point. We shouldn't need a smoking gun in order to justify taking some precautions now against future global warming (for example by entering into international agreements on greenhouse gas emissions). All we should require is a reasonable appreciation of the risk that global temperatures will rise and of the astronomical cost we will face if we're unprepared when it happens.

Dealing intelligently with global warming is very much like buying insurance. There's no scientific evidence that my house will catch on fire next week, but if it's all the same to you, I think I'll buy homeowner's insurance anyway. It's cheaper to buy the insurance now than to wait until the house actually burns down.

Of course, if the global-warming house does burn down, it almost certainly won't happen next week, and so it won't be us, the current generation of adults, who have to pay for the damage. It will be our children and grandchildren. With this in mind, global warming begins to resemble the federal government's debt as a problem whose solution cannot be put off forever, but one which at any point in time is easy to defer a little longer, foisting the costs onto our descendants.

So we need to quit treating global warming as something to prove or disprove, and instead as a risk to insure against. But that's not to say that gathering evidence is unimportant. After all, flood insurance costs more in a flood plain. What about the evidence on global warming?

It turns out that scientists have begun to discover disturbing new indications that it is taking place. Analyzing worldwide temperatures is an inherently difficult frontal assault on the problem, so scientists are trying to nibble at the edges.

The most striking recent evidence comes from a researcher at Bell Laboratories, David Thomson, who has analyzed the length of seasons at a number of different locations around the world. He concludes that while changes in season length were minor and predictable for centuries, the system has become unglued during this century, with season lengths becoming much less predictable. The increased variation in season lengths coincides extremely closely with the huge buildup of atmospheric greenhouse gases we have observed.

Thomson's study, as well as others that examine such meteorological phenomena as El Nino effects in the Pacific Ocean and the frequency of extreme weather events around the world, present strong circumstantial evidence of global warming. While they don't prove that global warming is happening, they show that something is happening, something that is highly correlated with greenhouse gas emissions, which we know can cause global warming.

We should not ignore these signals because of some high-falutin' and misguided belief that they don't constitute proof. If we do, we'll be like tobacco company executives who whine that even extremely high statistical correlations between tobacco use and lung cancer don't prove that tobacco use causes cancer. Just as the evidence on tobacco is accumulating, so is the evidence on global warming. We can't afford to ignore it.

So let's buy some insurance. It's not too late.