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Local scientist calls global warming theory 'hooey'

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Reid Bryson, known as the father of scientific climatology, considers global warming a bunch of hooey.

The UW-Madison professor emeritus, who stands against the scientific consensus on this issue, is referred to as a global warming skeptic. But he is not skeptical that global warming exists, he is just doubtful that humans are the cause of it.

There is no question the earth has been warming. It is coming out of the "Little Ice Age," he said in an interview this week.

"However, there is no credible evidence that it is due to mankind and carbon dioxide. We've been coming out of a Little Ice Age for 300 years. We have not been making very much carbon dioxide for 300 years. It's been warming up for a long time," Bryson said.

The Little Ice Age was driven by volcanic activity. That settled down so it is getting warmer, he said.

Humans are polluting the air and adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, but the effect is tiny, Bryson said.

"It's like there is an elephant charging in and you worry about the fact that there is a fly sitting on its head. It's just a total misplacement of emphasis," he said. "It really isn't science because there's no really good scientific evidence."

Just because almost all of the scientific community believes in man-made global warming proves absolutely nothing, Bryson said. "Consensus doesn't prove anything, in science or anywhere else, except in democracy, maybe."

Bryson, 87, was the founding chairman of the department of meteorology at UW-Madison and of the Institute for Environmental Studies, now known as the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. He retired in 1985, but has gone into the office almost every day since. He does it without pay.

"I have now worked for zero dollars since I retired, long enough that I have paid back the people of Wisconsin every cent they paid me to give me a wonderful, wonderful career. So we are

even now. And I feel good about that," said Bryson.

So, if global warming isn't such a burning issue, why are thousands of scientists so concerned about it?

"Why are so many thousands not concerned about it?" Bryson shot back.

"There is a lot of money to be made in this," he added. "If you want to be an eminent scientist you have to have a lot of grad students and a lot of grants. You can't get grants unless you say, 'Oh global warming, yes, yes, carbon dioxide.'"

Speaking out against global warming is like being a heretic, Bryson noted.

And it's not something that he does regularly.

"I can't waste my time on that, I have too many other things to do," he said.

But if somebody asks him for his opinion on global warming, he'll give it. "And I think I know about as much about it as anybody does."

Up against his students' students: Reporters will often call the meteorology building seeking the opinion of a scientist and some beginning graduate student will pick up the phone and say he or she is a meteorologist, Bryson said. "And that goes in the paper as 'scientists say.'"

The word of this young graduate student then trumps the views of someone like Bryson, who has been working in the field for more than 50 years, he said. "It is sort of a smear."

Bryson said he recently wrote something on the subject and two graduate students told him he was wrong, citing research done by one of their professors. That professor, Bryson noted, is probably the student of one of his students.

"Well, that professor happened to be wrong," he said.

"There is very little truth to what is being said and an awful lot of religion. It's almost a religion. Where you have to believe in anthropogenic (or man-made) global warming or else you are nuts."

While Bryson doesn't think that global warming is man-made, he said there is some evidence of an effect from mankind, but not an effect of carbon dioxide.

For example, in Wisconsin in the last 100 years the biggest heating has been around Madison, Milwaukee and in the Southeast, where the cities are. There was a slight change in the Green Bay area, he said. The rest of the state shows no warming at all.

"The growth of cities makes it hotter, but that was true back in

the 1930s, too," Bryson said. "Big cities were hotter than the surrounding countryside because you concentrate the traffic and you concentrate the home heating. And you modify the surface, you pave a lot of it."

Bryson didn't see Al Gore's movie about global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth."

"Don't make me throw up," he said. "It is not science. It is not true."

Not so fast, say scientists: Galen McKinley, an assistant professor of atmospheric and oceanic sciences at UW-Madison disagrees with Bryson, whom she notes is a respected researcher and professor with a long history at the university.

"There are innumerable studies that show that the shoe fits for global warming, I guess you could say, and the human causation for it," McKinley said.

"We understand very well the basic process of the greenhouse effect, which is that we know that the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increases the heat trapped by the atmosphere. You put one dollar more in the bank and you have one dollar more there tomorrow. It's a very clear feedback," she said.

Carbon dioxide emissions have been increasing over the industrial period, about 200 years, and can be observed very clearly through about 100 monitoring stations worldwide, McKinley said.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is increasing consistently with the amount that humans are putting into the atmosphere, she said.

"We know humans are putting it there, we understand the basic mechanism and we know that the temperatures are warming. Many, many, many studies illustrate that both at the global scale and at the regional scale."

She cited the work of John Magnuson, a UW-Madison professor emeritus of limnology who is internationally known for his lake studies. Magnuson records the number of days of ice on the lakes in southern Wisconsin, including Mendota and Monona.

His research shows that over the course of the last 150 years, the average has gone from about four months of ice cover to more like 2.5 months, McKinley said.

Bryson would say that it is due to coming out of an Ice Age, McKinley notes, "but the rate of change that we are seeing on the planet is inconsistent with changes in the past that have been due to an Ice Age."

The huge changes in temperature that scientists are seeing are happening much faster than have ever been observed in the past due to the change from an Ice Age phase to a non-Ice Age phase, she said.

"We know that humans are putting CO2 into the atmosphere at an incredibly fast rate, much, much faster than any natural process has done it in the last at least 400,000 years and probably more like millions of years."

The rate of change is consistent with human activity, she said. That is why so many major scientific societies are concerned about global warming, she added.

The release in February of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) put the likelihood that human beings are the cause of global warming at 90 percent. It noted that temperatures will continue to climb for decades, that heat waves and floods will become more frequent and that the last time the Arctic and the Antarctic were warmer than they are today for an extended period -- before the start of the last Ice Age -- global sea levels were at least thirteen feet higher.

IPCC, founded in 1988, is the joint venture of the United Nations Environment Program and the World Meteorological Organization. Every four or five years, it conducts an exhaustive survey of the available data and issues a multivolume assessment of the state of the climate. IPCC's reports are vetted by thousands of scientists and the organization's 190-plus participating governments.

"My views are very similar to those expressed by IPCC," said Steve Vavrus, an associate scientist at the UW-Madison Center for Climatic Research.

"Reid Bryson maintains his long-standing opinions on anthropogenic climate change, and he's certainly entitled to them," Vavrus said.

"The scientific process is never 100 percent sure and it could be proven wrong," McKinley added.

"But I would say that the chances of that based on all of the best information at this current time are incredibly slim. And even though that possibility is out there, it would be irresponsible of us as a society not to act based on the best scientific information we have at the moment, which is that humans are causing the warming of the planet," she said.

"If you saw smoke in your house, it would be irresponsible not to get your family out, right?"

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