



## EPA Admits Humans Burning Fossil Fuels A Big Factor in Global Warming

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June 3, 2002, *The New York Times* front page.

### U.S. SEES PROBLEMS IN CLIMATE CHANGE

Report, a Shift for Bush, Says  
Nation Will Need to Adapt

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

In a stark shift for the Bush administration, the United States has sent a climate report to the United Nations detailing specific and far-reaching effects that it says global warming will inflict on the American environment.

In the report, the administration for the first time mostly blames human actions for recent global warming. It says the main culprit is the burning of fossil fuels that send heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Earthfiles, news category.

**June 3, 2002 Boulder, Colorado** - Today the Bush Administration and its Environmental Protection Agency made the front page of *The New York Times* above the fold with an admission that human burning of fossil fuels is largely responsible for increasing greenhouse gases around the earth and global warming. *Times* reporter, Andrew Revkin, based his report on a 268-page document quietly submitted earlier this spring by the EPA to the United Nations entitled, "U. S. Climate Action Report - 2002, the Third National Communication of the United States of America Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change." In that agreement with the U. N., the United States is honor bound to report every five years on the progress this country is making on environmental issues. Reporter Revkin said the EPA report "strongly concludes that no matter what is done to cut emissions in the future, nothing can be done about the environmental consequences of several decades' worth of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases already in the atmosphere."

Further he summarized some of the negative consequences of a warmer earth from the Bush administration report: water shortages will become chronic. Right now drought is a threat nearly everywhere. No snow packs in the northeast or Colorado mountains, for example, and rapid melting of glaciers in Alaska and elsewhere. Some alpine meadows, coral reefs and barrier islands might disappear entirely. Southeastern U. S. forests are threatened. Along coastal and Arctic regions, damage to buildings and roads is expected from storms, rising sea levels and melting permafrost. Health problems to the public will come from heat stress, air pollution, extreme weather and diseases such as spreading malaria through mosquito bites and other insects, rodents and ticks. On the positive side,

the EPA report points out, food supplies might increase in some areas with longer growing seasons and some forests might expand.

To better understand this sudden change in the Bush Administration's characterization of a growing global warming problem that it admits is here to stay, but we're going to have to get used to without the government offering any steps to slow down greenhouse emissions, I called Dr. Kevin Trenberth, Head of the Climate Analysis Section at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado. He had read both the 268-page EPA report and Andrew Revkin's large article in *The New York Times*.

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## **Interview:**

**Kevin Trenberth, Ph.D., Head, Climate Analysis Section, National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), Boulder, Colorado:** "What the report certainly does is provide a nice compilation of everything that is going on and pulls together the fact that the National Academy of Sciences has stated that the climate is changing and it is mostly due to human activities. And it also pulls together all of the material on the emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere that have occurred, especially in great detail the past ten years from 1990 to 1999, and also makes projections for the next 20 years.

**Do you think what is happening is that the Bush Administration is seeing data which indicates global warming is not going to go away and they can't do much about it. So, the bottom line message is we're all going to have to learn to live with it?**

There is a thread of that which comes through quite strongly in the report. There are clear statements that they have made before that they do not want to do anything that would harm the U. S. economy. I think that is a little bit of a false dichotomy in some ways because it deals only with the effects of what would happen if you try to cut back on carbon dioxide emissions what would that do to the energy sector and what would that do to the economy? But it doesn't really take into account the costs of the disruption and potential damage that climate change would also bring with it, especially in the longer term.

**In the EPA report that you have read and which is behind *The New York Times* headline today, does it indicate what likelihood there is that the average mean global temperature could increase by as much as 10.5 degrees F. over this century?**

The range from the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change, had that as its top level. The more likely values are in the range of about 3 to 4 degrees by 2100, but that is very substantial by historical standards. It's the magnitude of a change that occurs when you go from warm to an ice age, except we're going in the other direction. As we go into a warming climate, we are much less concerned with things related to ice and snow. Instead, we are much more concerned about the availability of water because all of the snow and ice are mostly no longer part of the scene.

**Then you don't have snow pack and drought increases as it is this year.**

This year is a good example of the kinds of things we may see a lot more of in the future. We have widespread drought in the west and southwest some of the driest conditions we have ever seen. In parts of Colorado, there is no snow pack left at all. There is also a lot of fires and wild fires and it's only the 3rd of June. And so this is really quite worrying.

The eastern seaboard has also had some very dry conditions. On the other hand, it's been very wet in between in Illinois and areas in the Midwest there and it relates to the pattern of weather in part that has occurred.

**Computers have long projected that with global warming there would be more and greater extremes of drought in some areas and tremendous rain and flooding in others. But to grow crops satisfactorily, farmers need more moderation.**

I think that is correct. Certainly for agriculture, moderate rains are much more beneficial and these extremes are not good for many activities, for water management and everything related to comfort, energy usage because you have to have some people who are really baking and using air conditioning and putting more CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Then other people are trying to get rid of water out of their flooded basements.

**What could it be like in the United States by this August?**

Well, this remains to be seen. Certainly in the west, it is very worrying. The risk of some really bad fires is quite high this year. So, I'm hoping that everyone is taking prudent actions and trying to cut down on that by at least not leaving a lot of litter and dry materials laying around waiting for a lightning flash or human activities to set something underway that can't be stopped.

**As an atmospheric physicist at NCAR, what was your personal reaction to reading the article in *The New York Times* today based on the Bush Administration's EPA report?**

I think the implication is that clearly there is a big problem here because U. S. emissions have gone up substantially what is the actual number? 12% is the estimate this is the 1999 value relative to 1990. Under the Kyoto Protocol, we are supposed to have a cut by some 7% by the year 2012. Instead, we are going in the other direction.

The other thing is that this document suggests it is likely that total U. S. greenhouse emissions will increase by 43% between 2000 and 2020. So, rather than holding emissions constant or decreasing, we're projecting a very substantial increase. This goes along with much greater global climate change in the future. And so we are not putting the brakes on this at all.

This EPA report is really quite frank and useful in that regard by saying that if we don't do anything or we just continue on our current path, this is what we expect to happen. And so this provides the information for everyone to decide whether or not, or how much to spend to stop this, or how much to spend to try to adapt to this because I do think there will be various consequences, various disruptions, that will occur that are probably not very predictable. And there could be some strong negative impacts of these kinds of climate changes as we move into the future.

**If over the next twenty years there is a 43% increase in CO<sub>2</sub> release over what it is now, just from United States traffic and industries, isn't that going to accelerate the rate of average global warming temperatures?**

That's built into the Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change projections. I think that is probably consistent with some of the predictions we were talking about earlier in terms of the changes in temperature. But yeah, it doesn't put any brakes on it at all.

**If the United States is the greatest energy user and emitter of greenhouse gases, but won't take global leadership on trying to do something about a 43% increase in CO<sub>2</sub> over the next 20 years, what is the consequence of that attitude from your point of view?**

Well, we're headed towards more use of energy in ways that I think are not sustainable. This is one of the things we can't simply keep doing that. And certainly if other countries around the world try to follow the U. S. leadership in this regard and say, 'All right, we're going to keep increasing population and we're going to increase our standard of living so we use the same amount of energy per capita that is used in the United States.' That is just not sustainable.

As it is, the U. S. imports a lot of its oil and petroleum products from other countries and this is a security concern as well. So, by not restricting our use of energy in some fashion and trying to rely more on renewables and increasing efficiencies to perhaps the maximum extent possible, then we also increase our vulnerability in that regard as well. So, there are a number of reasons for trying to do this (cutback CO2 emissions), but of course, this administration will not last forever. That's something they also have to look forward to is whether people think that their environmental policies are good ones or not.

**Could the global weather patterns get so bad that the earth itself, the atmosphere, could slow down the pace of industrial development?**

I don't think so. Bad is a value judgment. The weather patterns can change somewhat and we might see more vigorous storms. And what happens if we have another Hurricane Andrew that causes tremendous amounts of damage. That heightens awareness for awhile. But I think the main thing that's really likely to put a stop to all of this would be a major war. And who knows? Maybe we're headed for one of those as well in India and Pakistan. That's the sort of thing that could really make a difference.

Heaven forbid!"

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**Website:**

**<http://www.epa.gov/globalwarming/publications/car/index.html>**

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