The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Thursday, June 13, 2013

A surprising new consensus about climate change

By Kyle Wingfield

If two is a coincidence and three is a trend, then y'all tell me what to make of this trio of stories:

1. From **the March 30 edition of The Economist**:

"Over the past 15 years air temperatures at the Earth's surface have been flat while greenhouse-gas emissions have continued to soar. The world added roughly 100 billion tons of carbon to the atmosphere between 2000 and 2010. That is about a quarter of all the CO_2 put there by humanity since 1750. And yet, as James Hansen, the head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, observes, 'the five-year mean global temperature has been flat for a decade.' ...

"The mismatch between rising greenhouse-gas emissions and not-rising temperatures is among the biggest puzzles in climate science just now. It does not mean global warming is a delusion. Flat though they are, temperatures in the first decade of the 21st century remain almost 1°C above their level in the first decade of the 20th. But the puzzle does need explaining."

2. From **an April 16 article published by Reuters**:

"Scientists are struggling to explain a slowdown in climate change that has exposed gaps in their understanding and defies a rise in global greenhouse gas emissions.

"Often focused on century-long trends, most climate models failed to predict that the temperature rise would slow, starting around 2000. Scientists are now intent on figuring out the causes and determining whether the respite will be brief or a more lasting phenomenon."

3. And finally -- for now -- from **a June 10 article in the New York Times**:

"The rise in the surface temperature of earth has been markedly slower over the last 15 years than in the 20 years before that. And that lull in warming has occurred even as greenhouse gases have accumulated in the atmosphere at a record pace.

"The slowdown is a bit of a mystery to climate scientists. True, the basic theory that predicts a warming of the planet in response to human emissions does not suggest that warming should be smooth and continuous. To the contrary, in a climate system still dominated by natural variability, there is every reason to think the warming will proceed in fits and starts.

"But given how much is riding on the scientific forecast, the practitioners of climate science would like to understand exactly what is going on. They admit that they do not, even though some potential mechanisms of the slowdown have been suggested. The situation highlights important gaps in our knowledge of the climate system, some of which cannot be closed until we get better measurements from high in space and from deep in the ocean."

These three articles point to a fact some of us have been pointing out for years: Not **all** of the science is settled when it comes to mankind's effects on the climate (a.k.a. anthropogenic global warming, or AGW). Now that this point is being made by three of the biggest climate-change-disaster cheerleading publications the media have to offer, perhaps we can get past the unscientific, counterproductive branding of skeptics as "deniers" and focus on what we actually know about the ways the climate is (and isn't) changing, and why, and what we ought to do about it.

There remains a scientific consensus that carbon dioxide traps heat in the atmosphere and that, all else being equal, this will cause global temperatures to rise over time. But there also remains scientific uncertainty, as noted in all three articles, about how big an effect CO2 has, and about how much that effect is amplified or mitigated by other factors. As prominent AGW skeptic Roy Spencer **notes**, the scientific record demonstrates that climate alarmists' models have been significantly wrong about the increase in temperatures.

Those questions are crucial because, as The Economist's article points out, the expected size of the temperature increase dictates whether we should take all available actions to avoid some of the warming (though whether such an avoidance is actually possible, from a technological or geopolitical standpoint, is a different debate altogether) or whether we should put our energy into adapting to the change. It is no coincidence that many of those who favor government-mandated command-and-control measures over the energy sector would favor the same policies even if there was nothing happening to the climate.

Given the (suddenly acknowledged) clarity about the limits of our scientific understanding; the decade-long leveling off of temperatures; the fact some scientists have taken great liberties in their attempts to demonstrate the current heating is unprecedented; the implausibility of revamping the entire global economy to drastically curtail carbon emissions; the fact that the U.S. has sharply decreased its carbon emissions without drastic, government-mandated changes but rather by simply shifting from one fossil fuel (coal) to another (natural gas) for much of our electricity generation -- given all that, I continue to side with those favoring adaptation. Environmentalist Bjorn Lomborg has persuasively argued that, rather than devoting scarce resources to make our economy carbon-free, we could spend money on measures such as Third World education and nutrition programs that would put the majority of the world's population in a better position whether the Earth warms a little or a lot. That, not an all-in anti-carbon campaign, is what I call insurance.

And now that even mainstream climate alarmists are admitting to the gaps in our understanding of the climate, maybe we can finally have a rational debate.