

Climategate Sheds Some Needed Sunlight on Global Warming Debate



Friday, December 11, 2009, 4:35

Written by Patti Brown and Brinn Shjegstad

With many of the world's leading scientists and political leaders – including Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie – gathered in Copenhagen this week and next to discuss the topic of global climate change, the science behind the theory is being questioned amid a scandal of disputed data.

People who have driven the global warming debate over the past few years are scrambling to deflect the heat about how statistics have possibly been massaged if not out-and-out manufactured regarding the earth's warming temperatures and its

man-made causes. There has even been talk among Hollywood's handful of conservatives that Al Gore's Academy Award should be recalled.

In the big scheme of things, why should Iowans care about Climategate?

Scientific accuracy, honesty and integrity are important for a state with two Carnegie Doctoral/Research Extensive Universities, Iowa State University and University of Iowa. The Carnegie designation is a significant classification for both institutions in attracting federal and private research dollars. For research to be of any value, it must be supported by sound methodology and rigorous data analysis. And valuable research is key to keeping these institutions vibrant for educating future generations of Iowans, as an employer for thousands of Iowans, and for new scientific discoveries that address society's most pressing needs.

Iowa is at the epicenter for agrifuel research and the I-35 "research corridor" between Ames and Des Moines encompasses some of the world's most important agronomy and biofuel laboratories. Any taint of wide-spread inaccuracy in scientific data could have a boomerang effect on our state universities and Iowa research firms such as Dupont/Pioneer Hi-Bred, Garst Seed, and Monsanto even if these institutions had nothing to do with researchers attempting to stifle debate with skeptics about climate change. If the public can not trust the science in one area of research, how can it be expected to trust the science in another area?

Over the last few years, the world has grown concerned about the possibility of man-made climate change. It has turned to science to discover new ways to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels for energy while, at the same time, increasing our ability to feed more and more people per agriculture acre while reducing the carbon footprint it takes to plant, grow, harvest and distribute the basic food grains every nation depends upon.

The public has believed that academic and scientific institutions have set high standards for conducting empirically based research conducted with reputable methodology and overseen by critical peer review processes.

If the earth's climate has been adversely affected by man's carbon emissions, indeed the academic and research community needs to help guide the path to rectifying the damage with scientific modeling that can measure the damage and propose ways to mitigating further harm.

Efforts such as cap and trade have been touted as one way to reign in the environmental damage done by the United States which is blamed by many for being the leading perpetrator of environmental damage to planet earth.

However if global warming has been supported by inaccurate data in an attempt to throttle economic progress of first world nations and level the playing field for developing nations, then the climate change movement may be more an elaborate effort to alter the balance of international political power than a campaign to save Mother Earth.

At this point the email debacle being called Climategate does not prove or disprove the theories of anthropogenic global warming. It does raise serious questions about public policy regarding fossil fuel use, alternative energy research, green house gas emissions and carbon offsets that is being driven by suspect research findings. Earlier this week, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources deferred adopting new regulations regarding green house gas emission that might make Iowa less competitive regionally and globally. The DNR has deferred making new rules until the Environmental Protection Commission finalizes new its regulations early next year. Hopefully more will be known about the missing or massaged data that has been used to promote the theory of global warming before the EPA moves forward with mandates promulgated on the back of what could be jacked up climate data.

Climategate also raises concerns about the need for transparency and scrutiny – call it a little bit of sunlight – in all fields of research from agriculture to education to medicine to rocket science. The public should expect no less especially when science is used to shape policy, and the scientific community in both academe and industry should demand no less of itself.

Patti Brown, M.S. and Brinn Shjegstad, M.S. are researchers with the Iowa Policy Institute, a public policy research and analysis firm. Shjegstad will receive her PhD from Iowa State University next week.