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opinion

Guest Commentary: Climate spin is rampant

By Roger Pielke Jr.

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Over the years, the political debate over climate change has been waged on many fronts. At various times at the center of the debate, we've seen green jobs, SUVs, Al Gore and climate "deniers." The latest front in this battle is extreme weather.

Earlier this week, Munich Re, a large German reinsurance company, fueled this debate with a report claiming that it has identified "the first climate change footprint in the data from natural catastrophes" in the damage caused by thunderstorms in the United States since 1980. USA Today put the claim on steroids by announcing on its front page, "Climate change behind rise in weather disasters."

A big problem with the claim by Munich Re and its amplification by the media is that neither squares with the actual science of climate change and disasters.

Along with colleagues around the world, I've been studying climate change and disasters for almost 20 years, and we just had a scientific paper accepted for publication this week on damage from U.S. tornadoes since 1950. What we found may surprise you: Over the past six decades, tornado damage has declined after accounting for development that has put more property into harm's way.

Researchers have similar conclusions for other phenomena around the world, ranging from typhoons in China, bushfires in Australia, and windstorms in Europe. After adjusting for patterns of development, over the long-term there is no climate change signal — no "footprint" — of increasing damage from extreme events either globally or in particular regions.

What about the United States? Flooding has not increased over the past century, nor have landfalling hurricanes. Remarkably, the U.S. is currently experiencing the longest-ever recorded period with no strikes of a Category 3 or stronger hurricane. The major 2012 drought obscures the fact that the U.S. has seen a decline in drought over the past century.

Such scientific findings are so robust that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded earlier this year that over the long-term, damage from extreme events has not been attributed to climate change, whether from natural or human causes.

So if the science is so clear on this subject, why then are companies and campaigners, abetted by a willing media, engaged in spreading misinformation?

The debate over climate change is well known for excesses on all sides. Those who claim that the issue is a hoax actually have a lot in common with those who see climate change in every weather extreme. The logic behind such tactics is apparently that a sufficiently scared public will support the political program of those doing the scaring.

Andrew Revkin, who has covered the climate issue for decades for The New York Times, explains that "the media tend to pay outsize attention to research developments that support a "hot" conclusion (like the theory that hurricanes have already been intensified by human-caused global warming) and glaze over on research of equivalent quality that does not." This leads to an amplification of "findings" such as the report presented by Munich Re this week and a complete blackout of coverage of our peer-reviewed paper on declining tornado damage.

Does it matter that campaigners and the media are actively peddling disinformation? For the most part, probably not, as the public is by now used to such nonsense on just about every subject from unemployment figures to Barack Obama's birth certificate.

But there is one group that should be very concerned about the spreading of rampant misinformation: the scientific community. It is, of course, thrilling to appear in the media and get caught up in highly politicized debates. But leading scientists and scientific organizations that contribute to a campaign of misinformation — even in pursuit of a worthy goal like responding effectively to climate change — may find that the credibility of science itself is put at risk by supporting scientifically unsupportable claims in pursuit of a political agenda.

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