

Part 4 – Why is Global Warming Science “Controversial?”

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his job depends on not understanding it.” – Upton Sinclair

In the industrialized world, the US is the only country where there is any serious movement to deny the science around global warming. It did not used to be that way.

So why is global warming science “controversial”?

Entire books have been written on this subject and I cannot possibly do it justice in this space but, here is the gist of it.

The companies that produce fossil fuels have a fiduciary responsibility to: first, provide a return on investment to their shareholders; and second, maintain the value of their stock.

To do the first, they have to extract those resources from the Earth and sell it to customers in the most cost-efficient manner possible.

To do the second, they have to keep on exploring for new reserves. If the amount of available resources they own decreases, so does the source of their future revenue, thus making their company a less desirable investment. No one wants to buy stock in a company with poor earnings potential.

If you owned a company whose product has been alleged to be damaging in some way or another when used as directed, you would first try to correct the problem. If the problem is not correctable and the alternative is to go out of business, you may then try to disprove the allegations or cast doubt on them, so you can stay in business.

You may fund the campaigns of politicians who represent places where you do business and would be happy to represent your interests. You may do what you can to prevent regulation or taxes which would make your product more expensive.

The “cast-doubt” tactic was used successfully by tobacco companies for decades, even though tobacco was known to be hazardous to human health as far back as the 1940s.

This same tactic has been used by fossil fuel producers for the last couple of decades, as the reality of human-caused global warming became more obvious. They even used the same public relations firms as the tobacco industry, in some cases.

It’s the old story of “follow the money”. The most prominent organizations that are “skeptical” of global warming science received funding from oil and coal companies. The most prominent politicians who state that global warming is “unproven” or even a hoax come from states like Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma and surprise, they get a lot of funding from the fossil fuel industry.

There is also this tendency by today’s journalists and media in the United States to present both sides of an issue, even if one side doesn’t have any factual basis and the tactics of denial fit right in with this tendency.

These tactics served to delay any cogent response in the US to the global warming issue by a couple of decades, during which time, CO2 emissions accelerated.

Regardless, as of now, even major oil companies are no longer denying the scientific reality. For example, if you go to Shell Oil’s web site, you will find this statement:

“ . . . [T]he world needs to halve carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 2050 to avoid the worst effects of climate change. So not only will the world require more energy but also cleaner, low carbon energy” (shell.us/energy-and-innovation/the-energy-future.html).

Of course, this wonderful sentiment is not preventing Shell from trying to drill offshore exploration wells in the high Arctic, even after several previous attempts just to get the drilling rig up there failed miserably due to the harsh conditions that still prevail in the Chukchi Sea.

Full disclosure – my first job out of college was as a petroleum geologist . . . for Shell Oil. But that was 30 years ago. I like to think I am a wiser person now.

Given what I just said, you may left with the opinion that I think fossil fuels are evil. They are not. They provide the energy which powers modern civilization, but like anything else we consume, there are trade-offs, such as damage to the environment from their extraction and use.

What we now know is that our continued use of fossil fuels is causing the planet to warm up quickly, which is likely to overwhelm nature’s and humanity’s ability to adapt. That goes under the heading of “Really Big Trade-off.”

Large portions of the world’s population lives near sea level and just a couple of feet of sea level rise will cause serious problems throughout the world. Major U.S. cities are very vulnerable, including Miami, New Orleans, Houston, Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston. Boston is already attempting to plan for a sea level rise of 3 to 5 feet over the next century.

The Department of Defense listed climate change as a potential driver of political instability as far back as 2010. Many think that the persistent drought in the Middle East is a principal cause of the political instability which produced the Syrian revolution and now the mass exodus of refugees to Europe.

Impacts to nature are myriad and substantial. Again, many books have been written on this subject.

So, you need to ask yourself if the continued trade-offs are worth it. My opinion is no, they are not.

The next question is “Now what?”

I will attempt to cover this one in my next column.