

An inconvenient winter

Environment: Record colds from North America to Baghdad reveal a double standard in global-warming alarmism

By Mark Bergin

A chorus of "I-told-you-so" has echoed daily across conservative talk radio stations since last month when data emerged from the four leading trackers of global temperature to reveal marked cooling over the past year—enough cooling effectively to erase the one-degree (Celsius) rise over the past century that has sparked so much public consternation about climate change.



Some global-warming skeptics have jumped at the chance to claim proof for their contention that all the fuss over reducing carbon dioxide emissions amounts to an environmentalist hoax. Others have suggested mockingly that an impending ice age now threatens civilization.

But what does the data really mean? Is one year of cooling evidence that a century-long global trend has suddenly ceased? Does it discredit prevailing theories about the effect of human activity on climate? Or is the frigid winter merely an aberration with little to no bearing on the long-term discussion?

Climatologist Roy Spencer, a former NASA scientist now at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, counts himself among those skeptical of the catastrophic projections popularized in former vice president Al Gore's Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth*. But Spencer is reluctant to hop on the "I-told-you-so" train lest he fall prey to the same trap ensnaring so many global-warming alarmists—namely, mistaking short-term weather events for indicators of long-term climate patterns.

Spencer told *WORLD* that unusually cold patches would occur even if the globe were headed for a cataclysmic inferno. In the same way, scientists would expect unusually warm spells along the path to another ice age.

That scientific reality of weather variation amid broader climate patterns is often ignored in mainstream reporting of global warming. Stories on skiers frustrated with diminished snowfalls or robins returning home several weeks early in spring routinely dot the nightly news circuit as evidence that Gore's claims ring true.

Spencer contends that the greatest impact of the new data may be to expose a double standard within mainstream media reporting: "A one-year change in temperature really doesn't mean much as far as the long-term trend goes. But it still is newsworthy from the standpoint that if the media is going to mention unusually warm weather and global warming in the same breath, then in order to stay objective it also needs to mention when it's unusually cold."

The recent dip in global temperature has garnered no such evenhanded treatment. Reports from most major media have sought to downplay the importance of the news, suddenly eager to explain the mechanics of weather variation for the sake of preserving the global-warming narrative.

In reality, the last year of cooling is rife with the kind of hype-inspiring tidbits that could alter public perception if given equal time to the hype-driven facts on warming. For example, the cooling represents the most precipitous one-year drop in temperature ever recorded. And anecdotal evidence from northern Canada to the Middle East offers dramatic confirmation of such figures. Polar ice levels have rebounded. Jerusalem, Damascus, and Northern Saudi Arabia reported unusual levels of snowfall this winter with Baghdad receiving its first blanketing in 100 years. A month-long cold spell in Vietnam killed tens of thousands of cattle.

But such events, unless they continue, are unlikely to change many minds. Much of the public remains unaware of them, and climatologists know better than to place too much stock in a single year.

Numerous theories exist to explain the low temperatures, ranging from a decrease in solar activity to a strong La Niña cycle. Kenneth Tapping of Canada's National Research Council reports "disturbingly quiet" solar activity of late, which if it continues could trigger a repeat of the miniature ice ages that took place in the 17th and 19th centuries. Nicola Scafetta and Bruce J. West, research scientists at Duke University, published a paper this month in *Physics Today* contending that the sun may account for as much as 69 percent of the earth's warming and could contribute to significant global cooling were it to slow in activity over the next few decades as many solar researchers predict.

If nothing else, the last year's cooling indicates that other factors outside of greenhouse gases are at work in determining global temperatures. Much of projected warming from organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is rooted in computer modeling, a science increasingly proved too simplistic by these kinds of dramatic weather variations unaccounted for in the models.

Spencer believes that similar cooling would need to continue for three to four more years before the broad scientific community would begin doubting its conviction on the prevailing impact of greenhouse gases: "For those that are convinced that carbon dioxide does cause substantial global warming, it won't change their minds. But for someone like me, who thinks that we have no clue how much warming carbon dioxide causes, it just goes to show that there is a lot of natural variability in the climate system."

On the international policy front, the recent cooling has generated no speed bump for movement toward worldwide caps on greenhouse-gas emissions. The European Union and the United States have called on developing nations like China and India to self-impose restrictions. And Congress seems bent on legislating similar policy stateside, though it may wait for the ensuing administration to take over next year.

The only opposing factor with hope of derailing calls for a national cap-and-trade program is evidence from Europe of the idea's abject failure. Industry restrictions have harmed the economies of nations like Britain and Germany to the extent that public opinion on the value of global-warming crusades may be shifting. A recent survey by the Environmental Transport Association of more than 2,000 Brits found that 30 percent believe there is too much publicity about climate change and more than half are fed up hearing about it.

Amid that kind of skeptical population, any more global cooling could spark a revolution of expanding carbon footprints.