

THE LATEST STORM OF CLIMATE ALARMISM

The National Climate Assessment is not nearly as dire as its cheerleaders suggest.

By Steven F. Hayward

May 8, 2014 6:55 p.m. ET

The third National Climate Assessment, released Tuesday by the White House, may not do anything to protect Americans from the effects of climate change, but it has done its primary job—generating alarming headlines in the media and setting the stage for a renewed push by the Obama administration for its climate-policy agenda.

Coming barely six weeks after the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's most recent alarmist report—also duly trumpeted in the media—we have now reached the junkie's-craving phase of the climate-change story, where bigger and more frequent fixes are necessary to keep alive the euphoria of saving the world. Confronted with polls and surveys finding that the public is tuning out climate change as a matter of vital concern, the climate campaign seemingly persists in thinking that one more report will turn the tide in its favor.

At 829 pages—plus a separate 137-page "highlights" summary—the National Climate Assessment is yet another behemoth report that few will entirely read, let alone fully comprehend or be able to judge. It can, however, be summarized by a sentence from the online introduction to the report: "Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present."

The report was produced by "more than 300 experts guided by a 60-member Federal Advisory Committee." Each chapter was assembled by specialists in subfields, though the complete roster of participating scientists includes a number who have expressed caution or skepticism about many of the claims popular today, such as climate-change-induced increases in damaging droughts, violent "superstorms," species extinction and air pollution.

In coming weeks, knowledgeable critics will no doubt do the tedious job of noting the report's omissions of contrary or confounding scientific findings. But this will likely have little effect on the shape of the climate debate, which is deluged with clichés and slogans such as "97% of scientists agree" and "only the fossil-fuel industry" stands in the way of solutions. Never mind that one of the lead authors of the report's chapter on "Adaptation" is an employee of Chevron U.S. The report argues that significant economic impacts of human-caused climate change in the U.S. are already occurring: "Corn producers in Iowa, oyster growers in Washington State, and maple syrup producers in Vermont are all observing climate-related changes that are outside of recent experience." These are less scientific facts than they are political statements. While climate changes can indeed be measured in economic terms, proof that they are "human-caused" is far from definitive.

In this respect, the report loosely tracks the economically risible 2006 "Stern Review" in Great Britain; its principal author, Nicholas Stern, later admitted that the report was crafted purely with political aims in mind. With the deep-Malthusian John Holdren advising President Obama and overseeing U.S. climate policy, does anyone think this report wasn't also politically calculated? More interesting are the chapters on what should be done, which account for barely 100 pages of the 829-page report. Missing from the admirably short chapter on "Mitigation," the term of art for suppressing hydrocarbon energy, is any of the dreamlike slogans that we can replace fossil fuels easily, quickly, or cheaply if only we'd ratify the Kyoto Protocol and step up subsidies for renewable-energy sources.

The mitigation chapter implicitly recognizes the unreality of the conventional climate agenda, and it concludes with an acknowledgment that we need much more research on affordable low- and non-carbon energy sources along with more basic climate science research into key "uncertainties." Anyone else who talks this way gets called a "denier."

This refreshing realism, almost wholly ignored in the media coverage, sets the stage for the longer chapter on "Adaptation," which is woefully incomplete in many respects. It laments rather than celebrates that a great deal of adaptation and planning, such as better water management and developing heat-resistant crops, is already happening spontaneously without a central policy, and will be necessary even if future climate change occurs for entirely natural reasons. And yet, as with the latest U.N. report on climate change, the chapter requires careful reading to see that climate realism—a responsible, "no regrets" policy that skeptics have recommended for more than two decades—is slowly if grudgingly gaining the upper hand in the inner councils of the climate establishment.

This will not slow the Obama administration's drive to kill off coal-fired power, block the Keystone XL pipeline and extend bureaucratic control over the energy sector, which has been the Holy Grail for the environmental movement for two generations. The White House spin on this report is undoubtedly intended to help rally another core Democratic constituency for the fall elections. Realists shouldn't cede the issue to the hysterical. By all means let's hope President Obama gets his wish, with climate and energy policy becoming a central issue in November.