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Censorship on Global Warming

When it comes to global warming, the Bush administration seems determined to bury its head in the sand and hope the problem will go away. Worse yet, it wants to bury any research findings that global warming may be a threat to human health or the environment.

The latest example of this ostrichlike behavior involves some heavy-handed censorship of a draft report that is due out next week from the Environmental Protection Agency. As described by Andrew Revkin and Katharine Seelye in yesterday's Times, the report was intended to provide the first comprehensive review of what is known about environmental problems and what gaps in understanding remain to be filled. But by the time the White House Council on Environmental Quality and the Office of Management and Budget finished with it and hammered the E.P.A. into submission, a long section on the risks posed by rising global temperatures was reduced to a noncommittal paragraph.

Gone is any mention that the 1990's are likely to have been the warmest decade in the last thousand years in the Northern Hemisphere. Gone, also, is a judgment by the National Research Council about the likely human contributions to global warming, though the evidence falls short of conclusive proof. Gone, too, is an introductory statement that "Climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment." All that is left in the report is some pablum about the complexities of the issue and the research that is needed to resolve the uncertainties.

This is the second shameful case of censorship involving global warming in less than a year. Last September, a whole chapter on climate was deleted from the E.P.A.'s annual report on air-pollution trends. That deed was done by Bush appointees at the agency, with White House approval, possibly because the White House had been angered by a previous report from the State Department suggesting the dire harm that could come from climate change. President Bush had dismissed that report as "put out by the bureaucracy."

The justifications offered for such censorship are feeble. One excuse is that global warming has been discussed in other reports and thus need not be dealt with again. But surely reports billed as comprehensive reviews should be comprehensive.

Another excuse is that the administration's new climate research plan will grapple with the issue. But given what we know about this administration, it seems almost inevitable that the experts who are mobilized to study the question will wind up focusing on uncertainties and the need for further research rather than facing up to the policy implications of the existing data.

Christie Whitman, the E.P.A. administrator, is putting on a brave face after her agency's capitulation. She says she feels "perfectly comfortable" issuing the broader assessment of land, air and water quality without waiting to resolve differences over climate change, where the evidence is less solid. But this sorry trampling of her agency's best judgment suggests that Congress, in confirming a successor after she steps down next week, will need to look hard at how free that person will be to offer the best scientific judgment on environmental issues.

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