



The Problem with Making Predictions - Oil or Climate

Posted by [Heading Out](#) on December 14, 2008 - 10:16am

Topic: [Alternative energy](#)

Tags: [coal](#), [oil price predictions](#), [solar power](#), [temperatures and glaciers](#), [wind](#) [[list all tags](#)]

One of my most enduring memories of Washington D.C. occurred while attending a meeting on Geothermal Energy Development, back in the days before the Iron Curtain fell. In the evening after dinner, I took a colleague from Eastern Europe, on his first American visit, for a walk down the Mall. We walked, almost alone, on a still, bitterly cold, dark evening with fresh snow on the ground, and stars peppering the sky above us to see the sights, including the Lincoln Memorial. We stood staring, like backwoods tourists, through the windows of the Air and Space Museum.

We came back to the hotel for alcoholic refueling, thinking that the energy problems of the time would guarantee unending research funding into new forms of energy, and that our future was assured. That was about thirty years ago, and we were, of course, wrong, at least in terms of the funding and sustained interest in unconventional energy sources. Now we are walking back over some of the same ground. Again, fluctuations in oil prices have removed the immediate perception of the need for alternate supply, and have also weakened the credibility of those of us who try to suggest how to deal with the problem.

Prophecy, particularly when it deals with the near term future runs the risk of being corrected by the actual turnout of events. The ups and downs of energy demand, and available supply—particularly when tied to the economic fortunes of nations, can make logical projection under one condition, but become apparently hopelessly in error when that condition doesn't happen. Thus, at the moment, with the declining price, and apparent glut of oil, the public no longer feels that there is a crisis; the credibility of those forecasting a crisis is damaged, and can only be reconstructed over a longer period of time and changing circumstance.

Author's note: I have added a comment to the bottom of the post.

I thought of that this past week. While the driver of “energy independence” has become the discredited cry of the outgoing Administration, it has been replaced with the need to find alternate energy sources in order to prevent climate change because “the science is indisputable”. The over-riding driver is that we are seeing global warming caused by increased levels of carbon dioxide.

For those who forget, back in [2007](#) the Supreme Court ruled that the EPA should regulate the emissions of the greenhouse gases that include carbon dioxide. It noted in passing:

Given EPA's failure to dispute the existence of a causal connection between man-made

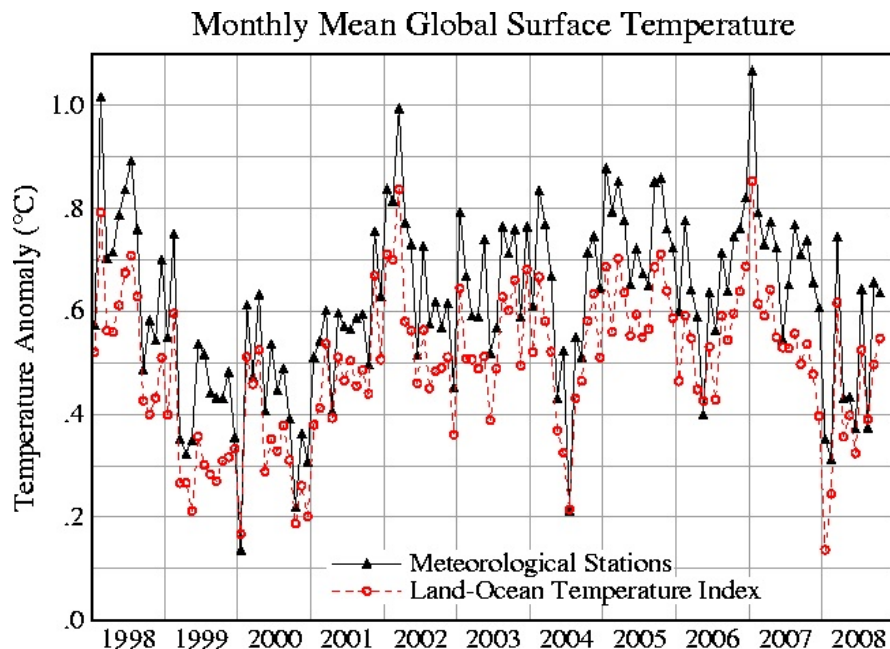
greenhouse gas emissions and global warming, its refusal to regulate such emissions, at a minimum, contributes to Massachusetts' injuries.

This was germane since Massachusetts had to show that it had standing to bring the case, which it did since the rising sea levels would threaten the state's well being. This has been reinforced by the recent decision by the EPA Appeals Board that [EPA has no valid reason](#) not to limit carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. Thus new plants will have to revisit their submissions to EPA for permitting, as the permits relate to their emissions.

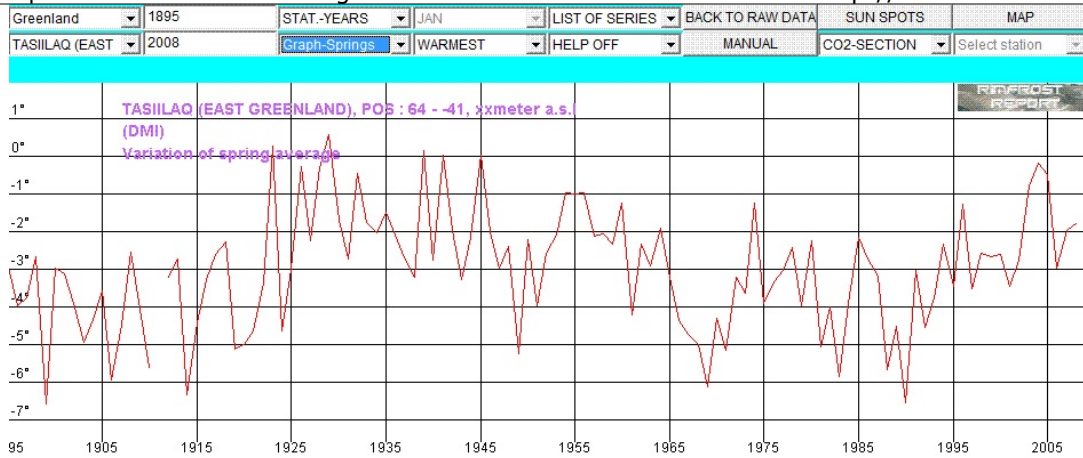
Revisiting EPA submissions will be a time-consuming effort. EPA will first have to write some regulations, so that the permitting of new plants will be likely considerably delayed. Also, as I have noted [in an earlier post](#), shortfalls in the power that the nation needs may develop as a result, particularly if it continues to get colder in winter.

An increasing level of acceptance and public support of global warming has been achieved, in part, by the repetition of stories that the world is warming, and that we can anticipate, as a result, that the ice fields of Greenland, the Arctic region as a whole, and Antarctica will melt, causing sea levels to rise dramatically. There is, however, as they say, a slight technical hitch to this concept. Nature is not co-operating, and the predicted events are not occurring with the inexorability that was initially projected (see for example [here](#)).

Now some of these shortfalls are beginning to be noticed on an increasing scale, although to quote Upton Sinclair (from the trailer to "An Inconvenient Truth"), "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." And there are a lot of folks these days who have salaries that are tied in some way to the perception of global warming. To give but a few examples that suggest the need for more of a scientific debate, graphs of temperature rise do not show the continuous increase that had been projected ten years, ago, but rather seem to indicate a [leveling and decline](#).



Greenland itself does not appear to be getting [any warmer](#).



Glaciers in Alaska may be starting to [grow again](#), under the [changing snow patterns](#). And the [Antarctic ice fields](#) have been growing to record size.

Now it may be that there are good scientific explanations for these events; they may be transient events that can change with time. But to the public, these are, like the short-term fall in gas, an indication that the pundits are wrong. It is comfortable if those forecasting global warming turn out to be incorrect, because then the uncomfortable changes to a different energy source or more conservation may not need to be made. In part, the problem is that this is not being addressed as a scientific issue, but rather an extension of the topic as politics, as it has been treated so often in the past.

I was thinking of this when I read a post in [the Washington Monthly](#) this past week. It excoriated a writer at [Politico](#) for writing a piece that began with the paragraph,

Climate change skeptics on Capitol Hill are quietly watching a growing accumulation of global cooling science and other findings that could signal that the science behind global warming may still be too shaky to warrant cap-and-trade legislation.

What I found sad about the critique was the comment,

How many scientists are quoted defending the global warming consensus of the scientific community? Zero. Lovley's article reads like something one might find on World Net Daily.

This is one of the subjects where, as I showed above, it is possible rather easily to find the basis for scientific question. If someone comes into a room and says, "It's raining," one can look out of the window and see whether it is, or not. Having a debate by the assembled multitudes in the room as to whether it is or not, and whether their credentials make their opinion worthwhile, is not as informative as if the visitor coming into the room is wearing a wet raincoat, regardless of their background. Ad hominem attacks only work in the short term, and become increasingly less effective as evidence continues to pile up that there may be another side to the story.

The recent [record snows in the Himalayas](#), for example, suggest that there may not be the predicted Asian droughts as the recharged glaciers will continue feeding water into the rivers. And in regard to the rising levels of the sea, there are [studies](#) that show that while sea level has been slowly rising for a quite considerable time, that there has been no acceleration in the rate, which runs around 1.3 to 1.5 mm per year, over the past 50 years. (This would mean that the sea

level increase over the next 100 years would only be some 140 mm or about 5.5 inches). Web sites that collect such information are growing in number and popularity. One such tracks peer-reviewed papers that have evaluated temperatures during [the Medieval Warming Period](#), frequently finding them higher than today.

Gradually this actual set of events makes its way into the public perception. If there has been no debate, then the proponents appear more starkly wrong when it all begins to be presented, and the initial position becomes discredited. (See for example President Reagan after Iran:Contra). Unless, that is, global warming has gone from being a scientific event, where events can be openly debated, to becoming a religion, where fanatical opposition to those who are not true believers brings attempted silencing by humiliation, excoriation, exorcism, excommunication and, in the past, immolation of such “heretics”. In such case, I suppose, then we face a different type of doom.

Administrations start with a certain amount of good will from the public--they have a certain initial credibility and belief that will carry them through some tough decisions. If the issues are openly and honestly debated, then unexpected change can be accommodated. This honest debate is good, because it means that the momentum to find the alternate energy sources that we need can be continued, rather than having the need challenged and discounted.

Without continued momentum, it may be that when, in the future, I return to the hotel from an exhilarating walk around Washington, the room may be cold and dark, due to inadequate power supply. Neither wind nor solar work on still, dark nights, and we may still need additional research and development to provide sufficient alternative replacements at scale for coal and natural gas.

Additional comment (or Part 2)

Grin:

Well first of all my apologies (this is written in Tampa Airport waiting to find out if the bad weather has mucked up my getting home) that I had to duck out of the discussion fairly early on – but given the nature of the discussion I thought I would add this second part to the post to explain what I thought I was doing, since it seems as though it was only evident to a few.

The whole debate on climate change and its relationship to energy is about to go through a paradigm shift, I believe, as the incoming Administration applies the policies that they come to power propounding. This is relevant to our continued discussion since those who are charged with preparing our Energy future are all very concerned with climate change. And, as the [lead item](#) in Drumbeat on Sept 15th notes

If you think Washington's debate over whether to bail out General Motors Corp. and Chrysler LLC is acrimonious, wait until the debates over energy and climate change policy start. The auto bailout debate has become a proxy for the coming clashes over energy strategy.

Now I have to tell you that the readership, and commenters here have both made me proud and caught me out. When I first posted on the climate change debate, back a couple of years or so ago, I got 150-odd comments some 55-odd of which were ad hominem attacks, and 5 were constructive debates about the science. I had thought that I might get the same sort of percentage here, and thus had planned this second part as a comment on this (since I don't think it will hold up as a credible strategy as the debate becomes more public).

Instead of which – of the 461 comments on the site at the time that I write, only 25 folk actually engaged in ad hominem – though some did it considerably more than once. On the other hand there were some 53 folk that engaged in a more productive debate (and while there many who deserve credit for this, let me take my hat off to Barrett808 who patiently debated beyond the point that I suspect my patience would have worn out).

I still feel, as I tried to imply with the post, that the tone of the debate is going to change. And it is going to change in a way more hostile to those who propound GW, because they will now be the “party in power” and thus more exposed to the scrutiny that brings. Thus the “snow in Tibet” type stories, that have often from the pro-CC point of view appeared in Drumbeat in the past, will now become more common but written now more in the anti-CC mode – since challenging authority is not an uncommon habit of journalists. This will also become more the case if it becomes less evident (the weather outside) that the world is continuing to warm.

Thus, if the policies are to be understandable and accepted the sort of discussion that has taken place here should become more common rather than less. Stating that the science is irrefutable, when there is data that may argue the opposite is not the way I think this should go. And the debate has to be at a level that folk can understand.

One of the reasons that I helped found this site is that I believe, quite strongly, that we are all better off if we are aware of all the facts, and can thus make an informed decision. But the facts should be presented and debated in a way that folk can understand, and with the explanations obvious to someone below the level of even a “science-challenged lawyer.”

I, thus, disagree strongly with the 11 folk, and also apparently including Nate’s advisors, who seem to feel that this site should be censored to stay away from this topic, particularly since I sense that the topics will be more and more inter-twined in the future. And, while censorship and trying to deride the presenters might work at a level such as a blog, it is unlikely to get much respect in the popular press. Thus, the point of the post, that more of the debate on climate change should be carried out in the public venue, rather than hidden away. Censorship, as an example, might preclude me from posting this addenda as a fresh post, or disallow commenting on the [latest EPA memo](#) relative to the Bonanza situation.

I'm heading out, may I wish you the Compliments of the Season.



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