

# spotlight

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## THE SCIENCE IS SETTLED

North Carolina Can Have No Impact on Climate Change

**S U M M A R Y :** There is a consensus on global warming, but it is not the consensus that environmental groups and many in the media suggest. There is no consensus on the extent of future climate change or the extent to which current climate change is human induced or a result of natural variation. The true consensus — where there seems to be no disagreement whatsoever among scientists — is on the proposition that there is no public policy currently being considered to restrict carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions by any level of government, including the State of North Carolina, that would have a measurable impact on the climate, either in the short or the long run (a century or longer). That proposition so far remains undisputed.

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There is a scientific consensus on global warming, but it is not the consensus that environmental groups and many in the media suggest. There is not a consensus on the extent of future climate change; particulars of the actual trend data tend to be inconsistent with both the theory and predictions of greenhouse warming.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which current climate change is human induced or a result of natural variation is also disputed. For example, a 2005 study in the *Geophysical Research Letters* argues that the sun contributed as much as 50 percent of the global warming that occurred between 1900-2000.<sup>2</sup>

The true consensus — where there seems to be no disagreement whatsoever among scientists — is on the proposition that there is no public policy currently being considered to restrict carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>)<sup>3</sup> emissions by any level of government, including the State of North Carolina, that would have a measurable impact on the climate, either in the short or the long run (a century or longer). That proposition so far remains undisputed.

### Even Kyoto Wouldn't Do It

[B]oth sides seem to agree that even full implementation of Kyoto would have a relatively small impact on greenhouse gas emissions or global climate change.

— George Givens, Counsel to N.C. Climate Commission<sup>4</sup>

The highly touted United Nations' Kyoto Protocol, advocated by nearly all

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climate-change alarmists, would have a trivial impact on global temperatures, and even that wouldn't occur for over a century. As was noted in a previous John Locke Foundation *Spotlight* report,<sup>5</sup> climatologist Thomas Wigley, himself a pessimist regarding the consequences of future global warming, has done the definitive study on this issue. He estimated that over the next 100 years the U.N. treaty, *even with 100 percent compliance*, would bring about only a trifling, 0.26-degree Fahrenheit reduction in the increase in global temperatures over what would occur if nothing were done.

Wigley's estimates are undisputed even by North Carolina's most vocal global-warming alarmist and global climate commission member, Dr. William Schlesinger, dean of Duke University's School of Environmental Science. Writing in *The News and Observer* (Raleigh), Schlesinger stated that "climatologist Wigley is right about Kyoto."<sup>6</sup>

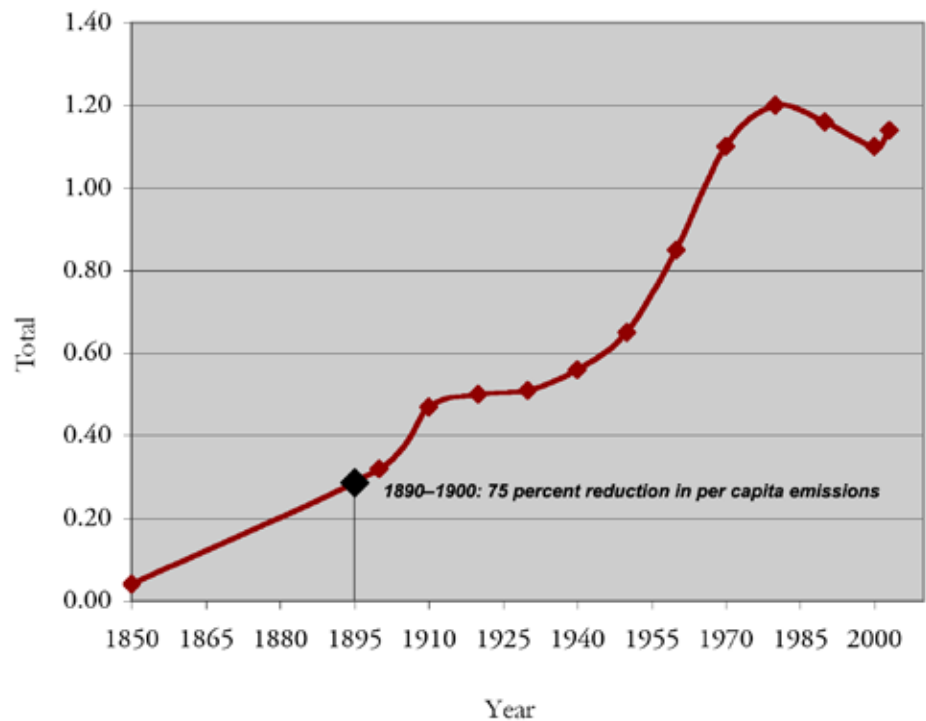
These conclusions regarding Kyoto are important in the context of policies being considered by the state of North Carolina. This is because nothing that the Commission is considering even approaches the CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions called for by Kyoto.<sup>7</sup> In fact, even California, which recently adopted the most intense restrictions on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the country, does not and will not have emission reductions that would come close to complying with what would be its share of Kyoto CO<sub>2</sub> reduction requirements. Unfortunately, most of the commissioners are unwilling to be informed by any of this and continue to advocate CO<sub>2</sub> reduction strategies in full knowledge that these forced reductions will not benefit a single citizen of North Carolina either currently living or yet to be born. It's equivalent to the drunk looking for his lost keys under the nearest streetlight, not because that's where he lost them, but because that's where the light is.

As an aside, Professor Schlesinger is an exception to the commission as a whole. He actually suggests that North Carolina go well beyond the Kyoto greenhouse gas reduction requirements. After acknowledging Kyoto's lack of impact on climate change, he argues that "we should devise an alternative that can stabilize the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere within the next couple of decades."<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Jerry Mahlman, also a global warming alarmist and a climate scientist from the National Center for Atmospheric Research, states quite clearly what this would mean. To stabilize the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere "every person in the world would have to ... cut [fossil fuel consumption] by 75 percent." He further concludes that "that's a horrific number if you think about everything you do: whether it's talking on the phone, or driving our cars, or heating or cooling our homes."<sup>9</sup>

To put Mahlman's calculation into perspective, a 75-percent reduction would force each person in the world back to the per capita levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that were being experienced at the turn of the 20th century, between 1890 and 1900. Professor Schlesinger proposes that this occur in the next 20 years (see Figure 1). Is there any question as to why Dr. Mahlman suggested that the economic dislocations of this kind of reduction would be horrific? Happily, there

**Figure 1. Global CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions from Fossil Fuels and Cement Production, 1850-2003** (In millions of metric tons of carbon per capita)



Sources: Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, [cdiac.ornl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751\\_2003.ems](http://cdiac.ornl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751_2003.ems); population data used to calculate per-capita emissions before 1950 are from the U.S. Census (averages of upper and lower estimates), [www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldhis.html](http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldhis.html).

is nothing being considered by the state of North Carolina that approaches this level of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

## **Ignoring Reality**

None of this should be news to the N.C. Climate Commission. Over the past year, the Commission has heard from several prominent climate scientists, none of whom disputed the fact that the policy recommendations the Commission would come up with — either taken separately or in conjunction with other states — would have any impact on short-term or long-term temperatures. Those were scientists who disagreed on the underlying projections regarding the extent to which human-induced global warming would be a problem.<sup>10</sup> In light of this consensus among those scientists, it would seem that the logical thing for the commission to do is to wrap up its work and write a final report discussing that fact. The report might make an acknowledgment like the following:

This commission heard testimony from prominent scientists regarding the future severity of global warming and its likely causes. They expressed a wide range of opinions on these issues. But one point came through loud and clear: regardless of the extent or severity of future global warming, there is no policy that the State of North Carolina could implement that would change the course of future climate change.

But making such an acknowledgment is not what is occurring. The commission will instead be considering a laundry list of possible policy prescriptions, all of which would ultimately alter the lifestyles of North Carolinians (see Table 1 for a selection of policies that will be under consideration<sup>11</sup>). In other words, the commission is looking to a host of policies, most of which would impose costs on and restrict the liberties of businesses and citizens of North Carolina, in full knowledge that none of the policies will have any benefits in terms of their ultimate goal — averting or ameliorating climate change.

So what is the argument in favor of pursuing this apparently irrational, “we must do something” strategy? Commissioner Schlesinger explained it with an analogy. He suggested that doing nothing about reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions was analogous to doing nothing with respect to helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina. He stated, “I could use the same logic to avoid sending a contribution to relieve the suffering in New Orleans. With this philosophy, contributions from North Carolina will make only a trivial difference to the total cost of cleanup, so why bother?”

But that analogy breaks down before it gets started. People know that collectively all of their efforts and donations will indeed have a measurable impact on the goal of helping the victims of the hurricane. Even a \$100 contribution has the measurable effect of buying \$100’s worth of food or supplies for people in need. On the other hand, if it were clear that none of the donations would reach their intended beneficiaries and would therefore not help a single hurricane victim, it would indeed be irrational to make donations to the cause. It is the latter situation that would be truly analogous to North Carolina pursuing policies to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Would the Katrina analogy work if North Carolina were to take Professor Schlesinger’s advice and make the attempt to reduce per-capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 75 percent? Dr. Mahlman argues that the earth would still warm by a full degree over the next 100 years even if the entire world were to adopt this “horrific” policy.

Going back to the Katrina example, how rational would it be for someone to make radical sacrifices in their lifestyle today — sacrifices that might include self-impoverishment — in the full knowledge of the fact that even if the same sacrifice were made by everyone else, its impact on the recovery of New Orleans would be very minimal and would not be felt for a 100 years? In other words, what if the action would not help even a single one of the victims of Katrina, or their children, or probably even their grandchildren? Yet the kind of logic that many on the N.C. Climate Commissions are trying to foist on the citizens of North Carolina is even more strained than that, given that nothing the commission will suggest would have any impact at all.

As Professor Ed Erickson, N.C. State economics professor and climate commission member suggested, “it could turn out to be the functional equivalent to the Mayans sacrificing virgins.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Economic Growth and Adaptation**

While there is nothing North Carolina can do to change the future course of climate change, there are things

that the state can do that will allow its citizens to prepare itself for the effects of possible future global warming, regardless of whether alarmists or optimists are correct about the scientific debate.

Since the beginning of mankind people have had to deal with the extremes of weather. What has allowed us as a species to overcome extreme heat, cold, snowstorms, hurricanes, etc., and live comfortably both at the equator and in Alaska is prosperity. In this context, probably the most important legacy that we can leave to future generations in terms of their ability to deal with the forces of nature (however mild or severe they would be) is a durable and useful capital stock in an economic system that allows entrepreneurs the flexibility to invest that capital in ways that will best accommodate people’s desires for comfort in their surroundings.

It is this capital stock that future generations will both draw on and build upon in developing new technologies that will allow us to ameliorate and be sheltered from the effects of weather conditions. The fact is that our generation and the generations immediately preceding ours have been able to live more comfortably in the face of weather extremes because

of the capital investment and technological advancements of the generations that have preceded us. Here are just a very few examples:

- ◆ **Air Conditioning.** Many argue it is responsible for the economic boom in the southern states like North Carolina.
- ◆ **Widespread, Inexpensive Central Heating.** This phenomenon of the last 100 years has allowed us to populate the coldest regions of the north.
- ◆ **Modern Building Techniques.** They have made durable housing that can withstand earthquakes, high winds, and heavy rain and snowfalls.
- ◆ **Modern Meteorological Science.** Satellite tracking and radar allowed us to forecast weather events further in advance and make appropriate accommodations.
- ◆ **Automobiles.** They have given people the ability to move out of the way of oncoming weather more quickly and have allowed emergency response to adverse weather events to be much swifter.

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| <p><b>Table 1. Proposed Recommendations by the Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources to Address Climate Change in N.C. (partial list)</b><br/> <i>Presented to the N.C. Legislative Commissions on Global Climate Change*</i></p> <p><b>New Taxes</b></p> <p>CO<sub>2</sub> tax</p> <p>Legislative changes requiring the NC Utility Commission to consider environmental and other factors (this is a hidden tax embedded in electricity rates)</p> <p>Public Benefit Charge on electricity bills for funding efficiency activities (tax)</p> <p>Vehicle Miles Traveled Fee (tax)</p> <p>Fuel Tax</p> <p><b>Regulations and subsidies meant to manipulate lifestyle and energy usage choices</b></p> <p>Demand-side management programs for the residential, commercial and industrial sectors (this refers to the demand for energy)</p> <p>Energy efficiency requirements</p> <p>Building energy codes</p> <p>“Beyond code” building design incentives and mandatory programs, incorporating local building materials and advanced construction</p> <p>Smart growth bundle (policies meant to encourage high density living arrangements and discourage more spacious low density living)</p> <p>Improve transit bundle (typically this implies large expenditures on light rail)</p> <p>Tailpipe greenhouse gas standards</p> <p>Anti-Idling</p> <p>Renewable energy incentives (biomass, wind, solar, geothermal, hydro)</p> <p>Environmental portfolio standard (renewables and energy efficiency) with renewable energy credit trading (in most states this is paid for through higher electricity rates)</p> <p>Cap and trade (this is a plan to indirectly ration the use of fossil fuels, i.e. gasoline, oil, and coal, by rationing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions)</p> <p><i>* Groupings, headings, and bracketed statements are by the author.</i></p> |
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All of these great developments have come about because of the capital investments of previous generations, made largely by entrepreneurs operating in a free market. What that means for policymakers in North Carolina is that the best thing they can do is help create an economic environment — a tax code, a regulatory system, and a property-rights regime — that will allow researchers and entrepreneurs to react to the future course of climate change and climate events in the same way they have in the past.

It should be noted that that would also include removing government subsidies from those who choose to live in areas prone to natural disasters, especially along the coastline. Those would include subsidized flood and wind insurance and subsidized loans and direct subsidies for rebuilding after disasters. The reason why the damage associated with hurricanes along the North Carolina coast is so much greater today than it was 50 or even 25 years ago is due not to global warming or an increase in the severity of storms, but to the fact that there has been a massive influx of new residents and coastal development. This, in turn, is at least partly the result of massive subsidies that coastal residents receive that shelter them from the full costs of their decision to live in more hazardous areas. The subsidy increases the amount of development, which in turn increases the amount of damages due to storms. People should be allowed to live wherever they choose, but they should also be forced to bear the costs of their decisions through private insurance that fully reflects the risks associated with their choices.

## Conclusion

North Carolina's policy decision is not between preventing global warming or creating the economic conditions that will allow us to adapt to it. To pursue a strategy of global-warming prevention or CO<sub>2</sub> mitigation is tantamount to doing nothing in terms of helping real people deal with real problems associated with the vagaries of weather. In fact, to the extent that these policies restrict economic growth and retard capital formation, they will actually be counter-productive.

The strategy of adaptation through economic growth is the only strategy that is rational and that holds any real promise of generating benefits or alleviating suffering over any reasonable time frame. Sea levels along the North Carolina coast have been rising for centuries and will continue to rise at similar rates, and hurricanes have been plaguing this region forever. Every dollar that is used to pursue a CO<sub>2</sub> mitigation strategy — which can have no impact on natural occurrences — is a dollar that cannot be used to deal with these pressing problems directly and immediately.

The real choice is between a strategy that holds no promise of working and a strategy that both history and economic analysis show *does* work to provide the technological advancement and the wealth and capital that certainly will be needed over the next 50 to 100 years if the alarmists are right in their predictions about global warming. If they are wrong, then there is nothing lost. Economic prosperity is a wonderful thing to draw upon in the face of adversity, but it is even better when that wealth can simply be used to improve our standard of living.

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## Notes

1. For a summary of the theory and predictions of the global warming hypothesis and how they coincide with actual data, see Joel Schwartz, "Climate Change Science, Policy, Politics," [www.joelschwartz.com/pdfs/Schwartz\\_IEA\\_111406.pdf](http://www.joelschwartz.com/pdfs/Schwartz_IEA_111406.pdf).
2. N. Scafetta and B.J. West, "Estimated solar contributions to the global surface warming using the ACRIM TSI satellite composite," *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol.32, 2005.
3. To clarify, carbon dioxide is a gas that is essential for all life on earth. It is exhaled by humans and "inhaled" by plants. Furthermore, it is not toxic or harmful if inhaled by humans at any relevant concentration levels. Its alleged negative effects come through its hypothesized impact on future climate change. In other words, there is no reason other than climate change to restrict emissions of the gas.
4. Email to climate change commission member Senator Robert Pittenger, September 26, 2006.
5. Roy Cordato, "State Can't Change the Weather: Even global CO<sub>2</sub> reductions have little impact," John Locke Foundation *Spotlight* No. 277, January 18, 2006, found at [www.johnlocke.org/spotlights/display\\_story.html?id=124](http://www.johnlocke.org/spotlights/display_story.html?id=124). The data is from Thomas Wigley, "The Kyoto Protocol: CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub> and Climate Implications," *Geophysical Research Letters*, July 1, 1998.
6. William H. Schlesinger, "A cooperative climate," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh), February 3, 2006, p. A15.
7. Kyoto calls for the United States to reduce emissions to 7 percent below 1990 levels. Even the targets recently adopted by California, which are the toughest in the nation, do not approach this goal.
8. *Op. cit.* at note 4.
9. Jorge Salazar, "Interview: Straight talk about Climate Change. Jerry Mahlman on Dealing With Your Grandkids' Problem," *Earth and Sky*, [www.earthsky.org/shows/observingearth\\_interviews.php?id=49567](http://www.earthsky.org/shows/observingearth_interviews.php?id=49567).
10. It should be noted that the climate scientists testifying before the commission all took more optimistic positions with respect to future climate change, while those scientists with no particular expertise in climatology, meteorology or related fields all held what might be called

pessimistic or alarmist views regarding future global warming.

11. At a recent forum, this author asked Department of Energy and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary William Ross if any or even all of DENR's proposals enacted together would have any impact on future climate change. He acknowledged that they would not. (Annual meeting, Carolina Air Pollution Control Association, October, 2006.)
12. Addressing a meeting of the Climate Commission, as reported in the *New Bern Sun Journal*, October 4, 2006, [www.newbernsunjournal.com/SiteProcessor.cfm?Template=/GlobalTemplates/Details.cfm&StoryID=30274&Section=Local](http://www.newbernsunjournal.com/SiteProcessor.cfm?Template=/GlobalTemplates/Details.cfm&StoryID=30274&Section=Local).