

Panel clears researchers in 'Climategate' controversy

The experts find 'no evidence of any deliberate scientific malpractice' by the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit, which had been accused of misrepresenting global warming data.

Henry Chu, Los Angeles Times, 4-15-10

LONDON -- Climate change researchers accused of manipulating or hiding data in last year's "Climategate" affair were guilty of sloppy record-keeping but not bad science, an independent panel in Britain concluded Wednesday.

Allegations that the researchers misrepresented data to promote the idea of human-caused global warming rocked the scientific community in November, just as world leaders were preparing for an environmental summit.

The allegations, made by skeptics of climate change, were based on e-mails hacked from the University of East Anglia in eastern England, including one in which a scientist wrote of using a "trick" to mask an apparent decline in recent global temperatures.

But a panel of experts tasked with examining the underlying science said it "saw no evidence of any deliberate scientific malpractice in any of the work" by the university's Climatic Research Unit.

The panel was commissioned by the university. Its seven members, including one from MIT and two from Cambridge University, were chosen in consultation with the prestigious scientific organization the Royal Society.

Instead, "we found a small group of dedicated if slightly disorganized researchers" who did not store their data and working notes as well as they could have but whose science was conducted "with integrity," the committee said in a report released Wednesday.

The panel did recommend that the researchers work more closely with trained statisticians to strengthen the soundness of their conclusions. But even if such cooperation had been in place, the researchers probably would not have arrived at significantly different results, the panel said.

"The fact is we found them absolutely squeaky clean," the head of the panel, Ron Oxburgh, a geologist and former government advisor, told the BBC. He said some of the criticism by skeptics, who pointed to the e-mails as proof of a massive scientific coverup, was "just plain nasty and ill-informed."

The controversy broke just a few weeks before the climate change summit in Copenhagen attended by President Obama and other international figures. Analysts say Climategate may have contributed to a disappointing outcome at the summit by somewhat neutralizing the sense of urgency in the need to tackle human-caused global warming.

The incident forced Phil Jones, who wrote of using the trick in a presentation, to step down as head of the Climatic Research Unit.

Two weeks ago, a parliamentary committee cleared Jones of any intention to deceive, but chastised the university for obstructing public requests for information, saying that scientific data ought to be freely available and transparent.

It is doubtful, however, that skeptics of climate change will be satisfied. Some question the impartiality of Oxburgh, who has financial interests in renewable energy, which is increasingly being promoted as an alternative to carbon-based fuels.