

The List of 17

People love making lists. “To Do” lists. Shopping lists. Gift lists. Invitation lists for weddings. Lists of mountain summits climbed, of ballparks visited. Lists of places to see before they die.

Senator James Inhofe recently compiled a different kind of list. His list contains the names of 17 climate scientists. All 17 have spent their scientific careers trying to improve our understanding of the nature and causes of climate change.

Some “listed” scientists – myself included – have identified the “fingerprints” of human influences on global climate. Some have used tree rings, ice cores, and corals to piece together a picture of how Earth’s climate has changed over the last few thousand years. Some have attempted to decipher the messages in millions of thermometer measurements from weather stations around the globe. Some have built computer models of the climate system, and tried to understand the “shape of things to come” for Earth’s climate.

All 17 scientists do what they do because they are impelled by a deep and abiding curiosity about the world in which we live. They want to figure things out. They want to understand the complex story that the climate system is telling us. They chose their career paths because they love and care about what they do – not as a scheme to get rich, or alter the global system of government.

Senator James Inhofe has a different view of the common denominator in this list. In a recently produced report full of unfounded allegations and conspiracy theories, the Senator claims that the 17 listed scientists may have broken Federal laws and should be treated as possible criminals. Such accusations have a chilling effect, and make it difficult to have rational public discussions about climate science.

Several years ago, Senator Inhofe referred to global warming as a “hoax”. He does not trust the detailed scientific assessments of the U.S. National Academy of

Sciences, the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The Senator – who is not a climate scientist – thinks that the planet is not warming, and even if it were, that all warming is purely natural.

Senator Inhofe is dangerously wrong. The planet is warming. The warming is unambiguous. This winter's heavy snows do not negate the reality of the slow, global increase in Earth's surface temperature over the last century. Nor do warmer conditions many millions of years ago show that the current warmth is a natural phenomenon.

Compelling science links a large share of the planet's warming to human influences. We know – beyond a shadow of a doubt – that human activities have changed the composition of Earth's atmosphere. And we know that these human-caused increases in the levels of greenhouse gases cause the atmosphere to trap more heat. This is not rocket science. It's simple, basic physics.

Like Senator Inhofe, some take comfort in clinging to the false hope that humans do not have the capacity to influence global climate; that we do not need to make any changes in how we produce and use energy; and that “business as usual” is good enough for today.

Sadly, “business as usual” will not be good enough for tomorrow. The decisions we reach today impact the climate future that our children and grandchildren will inherit. I think most Americans want those decisions to be based on the best-available scientific information – not on wishful thinking, or on well-funded disinformation campaigns.

Now back to the list of 17. Like the other scientists on the list, I simply want to do my job. I want to do scientific research in the public interest. I want to follow that research where it leads me. If it shows – as it has – that humans are changing global climate, I want to report on that finding without fear of political harassment, and without fear of criminal prosecution. Without fear of threats. Without fear of the consequences of speaking truth to power.

I say these things not because I want sympathy, or seek attention. I am writing this because I think it is time to tell Senator Inhofe that he cannot criminalize climate science and climate scientists. It is time to tell the Senator that he should focus his creative energies on addressing the problem of human-caused climate change, and on helping our country prepare now for the climate changes we cannot avoid.

While our planet will warm inexorably over the next few decades, an increasingly chill and bitter wind is blowing on Capitol Hill. We ignore that wind at our peril.

Benjamin Santer

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow

San Ramon, California

March 5, 2010