

Comments on “Climate Change Impacts on the United States” Overview Section

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Kenneth W. Chilton, Ph.D.
Manager of Environmental Research
Center for the Study of American Business
Washington University
Campus Box 1027, One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO. 63130-4899
Phone: 314-935-5691
Fax: 314-935-5688

The Overview de-emphasizes one important point: Climate modeling has still not reached the level of sophistication that makes regional climate forecasting meaningful. Though a decade has passed since this national assessment was called for, the US Global Change Research Program and the National Assessment Synthesis Team is not in a position to provide a meaningful regional assessment of climate change in the United States in the 21st century.

To its credit, NAST does report the differences in the predictions of the two models that it uses to develop “scenarios” for regional US climate developments. Nonetheless, the media and policy makers are predictably underplaying these differences and reporting the most dramatic scenarios as though they are credible predictions. A more forceful caveat about such application of this information would be helpful.

The summary and conclusion sections of the Overview place some emphasis on adaptation. Even more emphasis should be placed on this climate change strategy.

Furthermore, the reasons why adaptation is important should be discussed. The high economic cost of even the timid Kyoto protocol approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the trivial reductions in global warming projected for this sacrifice should signal policy makers that a different approach is needed to mitigate potential climate change impacts. The huge emissions reductions needed worldwide to halt the growth in greenhouse gas concentrations make it extremely unlikely that developing nations will accept the levels of economic sacrifice necessary to realize these reductions.

It is also the case that the link between greenhouse gas buildup and climate change is being modeled in a simplistic matter with water vapor feedback still not well understood. Some change in global climate will occur even if greenhouse gas concentrations could be brought under control.

Sea levels have been rising ever since the end of the last ice age. U.S. and global population will increase regardless of climate change with a good deal of the population attempting to locate in areas prone to flooding or to sea level rise or to tropical storms. Also, US ecosystems will be affected by warming – some negatively but, perhaps, some positively—regardless of whether it has natural or anthropogenic origins. Though Alpine meadows are a source of beauty, as are sugar maples in the fall in the northeast, these ecosystem changes, should they occur, are beyond

our control and should not cloud our sense of the best strategy for responding to climate change for those factors that we can control.

On page 117 of the overview, NAST concludes, “A general sense emerged that American society would likely be able to adapt to most of the impacts of climate change on human systems but that the particular strategies and costs were not known.” This statement is worthy of a call out. And I second the recommendation on page 118 that “the next assessment should undertake a more complete analysis of adaptation.”

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on “Climate Change Impacts on the United States.”

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