

PHYSICS COMMUNITY

Attacks on IPCC Report Heat Controversy Over Global Warming

The claim that human activities significantly influence global climate has long been hotly debated. So when the influential Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) gave its support to this claim for the first time in its recently published "Second Assessment Report" (SAR) on global climate change, the report came under immediate attack by a small but vocal community consisting of the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) (a Washington, DC-based association representing about 60 companies from the energy sector) and a small number of scientific skeptics. These critics claim that the IPCC broke its own procedural rules in preparing the report, and that the essence of a crucial chapter (see box on page 56) that deals with the detection and attribution of global warming was altered in the process. Scientists and officials of the IPCC, for their part, deny any wrongdoing.

The IPCC was established in 1988 by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization to provide periodic comprehensive assessments on climate change to guide policymakers internationally. The SAR, a three-volume report consisting of assessments of the science of climate change prepared by Working Group I, impact and response strategies by WG II and economic and social implications by WG III, involved about 2500 scientists worldwide and was reviewed extensively by scientific experts and by national governments. The report will be used to advise the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). "The most immediate influence will be on the Conference on the Parties [a UN body that is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the FCCC]," says Bronson Gardner, a consultant to the GCC. "If they are convinced that climate change is sufficiently threatening, they may add additional requirements to the FCCC, which could commit many countries to adopt new regulations."

"Chapter 8 ['Detection of Climate Change and Attribution of Causes'] was the most politically charged and hotly debated subject"

A statement by scientists that the "balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate" has stirred up a political controversy that seems to be about everything except the science.

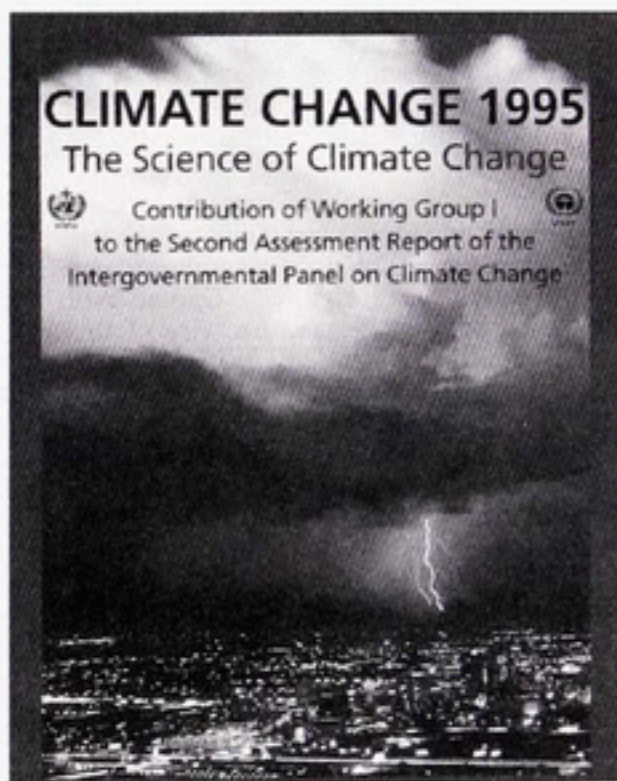
at WG I's plenary meeting in Madrid (27–29 November 1995), says Gardner, a view echoed by many others. The main focus of the Madrid meeting, however, was to prepare the Summary for Policy Makers (SPM), based on the eleven chapters of the WG I report. The SPM concludes that "the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate," a statement that has potentially enormous implications for policy-making, for the energy industry and for the global economy.

"It took hours and hours of painstaking negotiation," Gardner says, adding that there was "some high-powered deal cutting" in agreeing to the SPM. But all 96 nations finally approved the SPM line by line, and no changes were made to it after the Madrid meeting.

The individual chapters, in contrast, were not approved line by line, but rather were "accepted," a technical term used by the IPCC to denote that a document "presents a comprehensive, objective and balanced view" of the subject matter. John Houghton, cochairman of WG I, stresses that acceptance of the chapters meant that changes would be made to reflect the discussions at the Madrid meeting.

The GCC and its allies are concerned—after all, policies aimed at curtailing fossil fuel emissions would have a major impact on the energy interests that the GCC represents. (Since 1991, representatives of the coal and oil industries have mounted a series of attacks on both the science of climate change and the scientists of the IPCC, according to an article in last December's *Harper's Magazine*.) The gist of the allegations is that changes made to chapter 8 after the Madrid meeting were "unauthorized" and in violation of the IPCC's procedural rules, and that the revised chapter suppresses scientific uncertainty to present more strongly the case for the influence of human activity on global climate.

But the WG I scientists and IPCC officials staunchly disagree with the allegations, which they say are unfounded. "These attacks mean that the energy industry is taking the science seriously, and that they acknowledge that the implications are serious for them," says Alan Robock, a climatologist at the University of Maryland at College Park and a contributor to chapter 8. "They would have found something to make trouble over, just to stall things," he adds. The debate has evolved into a fervid and ongoing brouhaha, and the heart of the controversy—the issue of human influence on global climate—seems sometimes to get lost in the process. Each side suspects political motives on the part of the other; the lead author of chapter 8, Benjamin Santer, an atmospheric scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, feels his scientific integrity is being challenged; and the GCC and other detractors have questioned the credibility of the IPCC.



COVER OF THE WG I contribution to the 1995 IPCC report on climate change, published this May by Cambridge University Press.