

CHAPTER SEVEN

Spinning the Global Warming Issue

“Our own president and vice president are embarrassed and ashamed by our warlike heritage and our unabashed economic success. Hence they seek every opportunity to give up our national sovereignty to world bureaucratic bodies like the United Nations . . . [giving them authority] to scold and punish us for our faults and then redistribute our wealth to the sick, lame and lazy nations who have suffered so from our overachievement.”

— Jake Cummins, Montana Farm Bureau executive vice president, writing about treaties on climate change.

The anti-environmental campaigns pursued by the Farm Bureau may be all about business, but often the rhetoric used takes on an emotional tone. Farm Bureau speeches and literature on these issues seem designed to inflame. The information provided is sometimes misleading or downright false. Consider the issue of global climate change.

At its 1999 convention, AFBF gave members a videotape titled, “Kyoto in Perspective: A

Flawed Treaty Impacts America.” The title refers to the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty negotiated in December, 1997, that commits nations to reducing emissions that contribute to global warming. The United States has not signed the Kyoto Protocol, and AFBF has bragged about its influence in preventing ratification by the Senate.

In the video, Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Nebraska) warns that “devastating economic consequences to agriculture families would ensue” if the United States signs the treaty. Even more frightening, Hagel says, the Kyoto Protocol would give “United Nations bureaucrats the ability to go into Nebraska and close down a farm or a ranch” because “that farmer’s soil might not comply with the Kyoto treaty. He might have too much nitrogen in the soil. This is real,” Hagel says on the tape. “This is in the protocol.”

In reality, this is not in the protocol. The protocol gives the United Nations no such power. Nothing in the treaty suggests that anyone could shut down an individual farm against an owner’s will. Senator Hagel’s interpretation “is absolutely incorrect,” says Robert Watson, who

chairs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. To begin with, Watson says, the treaty makes it clear that all decisions regarding greenhouse gas reductions are entirely up to individual nations. If the United States ratified the protocol, “no one could tell the U.S. how to meet its reduction targets,” Watson said in an interview.

If the United States does ratify the treaty, the nation must reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases by seven percent by the year 2012. Most greenhouse gases come from burning fossil fuels, and analyses published by Consumers Union and others show that simply improving gas mileage in automobiles could go a long way toward meeting the target. Other conservation and efficiency improvements also would help, and several economists have argued that taking these steps actually would make the United States more competitive in the world market by reducing the amount of energy needed to produce goods and services.

The Farm Bureau videotape fails to address any of these arguments, which is not surprising considering that the tape was produced by the Global Climate Information Project, an industry alliance consisting of auto makers, oil companies and others. The tape, of course, does not reveal who is behind this Information Project.

As mentioned earlier, the Farm Bureau and these same industries have worked hard to roll back requirements for better gas mileage in cars. Improved mileage would save consumers, including farmers, a lot of money and might also help reduce global warming. But fuel efficiency in American cars has been dropping since this industry coalition went to work.

Instead of contributing to potential solutions, the Farm Bureau seems intent on scaring farmers into believing that efforts to reduce global warming will mean that energy prices will rise so high that they will be unable to run their machinery. A 1997 analysis by AFBF economists predicted that the climate treaty would cause at least a 24 percent loss in net farm income. According to that analysis, “net profits for corn growers could be slashed by 23 to 51 percent. . . . Net profits for hog producers could be reduced 40-85 percent. . . . Smaller farmers and younger farmers . . . would find their farms unprofitable and abandon agriculture.” Farm Bureau leaders were still quoting this study in 1999 — without pausing to note that the predicted profit losses have already taken place, not because of higher energy prices, but because of monopolistic trends in agribusiness.

The Farm Bureau insists that evidence of global warming is lacking and that no scientific consensus exists about the process. “If you look at some of the scientific data, there’s nothing that really proves that dramatic climate changes have taken place,” Louisiana Farm Bureau president and AFBF board member Ronnie Anderson said during the 1999 convention. On the videotape distributed there, Representative Jo Ann Emerson (R-Missouri) implies that reports of scientific consensus are bogus. “People heard we’ve got 2,600 quote-unquote scientists who say global warming is a problem,” Emerson tells viewers. “But if you look at who’s who, you find just a few geologists, a physician, an OB-GYN! Psychologists. Two climatologists. They don’t know any more about global warming than I do.”

“That’s absurd,” says Robert Watson, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and a former NASA atmospheric chemist. “Our working groups are made up of the best scientists in the world in their fields.” Indeed, the lists of climate scientists who have contributed to or reviewed the panel’s studies comprise many pages of names from the world’s most prominent institutions. Agriculture specialists, economists and scientists from other disciplines are also on the panel, Watson says, because the panel is looking at the potential consequences of global warming as well as atmospheric processes. “But I can assure you that none of them are psychologists or OB-GYNs,” he says.

At a 1998 House subcommittee hearing, a group of scientists told Representative Emerson she was mistaken and was mixing up two different groups. In one case, a public-interest group had recruited 2,600 people from all walks of life to sign a petition expressing their concerns about global warming. The climate change panel, on the other hand, consists of 2,500 scientists. In 1995 this panel stated unequivocally that because of continued greenhouse gas emissions, the Earth had entered a period of climatic instability likely to cause “widespread economic, social and environmental dislocation over the next century.” Even so, the Farm Bureau has continued to distribute the misleading video. And all the while, evidence of climate change continues to build:

- On January 11, 1999, while Senator Hagel was telling the AFBF convention that the Kyoto Protocol “threatens the liberties of individual Americans and U.S. industry,” the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) were releasing reports showing that the 1990s were the hottest decade ever, 1998 was the hottest year and the pace of warming has accelerated. Higher temperatures pose a variety of threats to agriculture, including increases in insect and plant pests and harmful shifts in rainfall.

- On January 28, 1999, the American Geophysical Union issued a policy statement saying that there is a “compelling basis for legitimate public concern” about human-induced climatic change and that scientific uncertainty “does not justify inaction” in coping with it. The union is this nation’s most broadly based professional organization representing earth and space scientists.

- On March 2, 1999, the *New York Times* reported that “separate studies using different methods in the last three years have found that as the Earth’s atmosphere warms, spring warmth is arriving earlier and autumn coolness is coming later in the Northern Hemisphere.”

- On March 5, the *New York Times* reported that highly sophisticated NASA aerial surveys had found that “the southern half of the Greenland ice sheet, the second largest expanse of land-bound ice on earth after Antarctica, has shrunk substantially in the last five years.”

- On March 15, the journal *Geophysical Research Letters* published results of a University of Massachusetts and University of Arizona study finding that the Northern Hemisphere was warmer in the 20th century than in any other century of the last thousand years. The study concluded that man-made greenhouse gases were

primarily responsible. If estimates that the Earth will warm by 3.5 degrees Celsius during the 21st Century are correct, the Earth will become warmer than it has been for millions of years.

THE FORECAST FOR FARMERS

“Even if it is proved that global warming will occur, who’s to say such a phenomenon would be detrimental? There are those who argue that global warming could benefit — not harm — the environment.”

— C. David Kelly, assistant director of news services, AFBF.

In its 1995 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change detailed what is likely to happen as the planet warms. Intensified storms, widespread flooding and crop-destroying droughts were listed. Texas farmers have some experience with all of those, and whether recent conditions are related to global warming or not, the bad weather seems to be getting worse. In February, 1999, Texas A&M economists reported that Texas farmers and ranchers lost \$2.4 billion in income because of a 1998 drought. Farm-

dependent businesses in small rural towns lost another \$8 billion. If global warming adds to these drought problems, it does not bode well for Texas agriculture.

Scientists in Colorado also have found that warmer nighttime temperatures are already killing off grasses that ranchers depend on to feed their cattle during dry summer months. As Farm Bureau delegates were gathering for the 1999 convention, the highly respected journal *Science* published a study by Colorado State University ecologist Richard Alward showing that exotic plants and noxious weeds are taking over where blue grama grass used to flourish. Blue grama thrives during hot summers and is tolerant of drought but needs cool night temperatures to survive. It can get cattle through times when no other nutritious grasses survive.

The Farm Bureau obviously has chosen to ignore these studies and other credible scientific evidence of the threat that climate changes pose for farmers. Instead, Farm Bureau rhetoric on global warming appears to be driven by the organization’s own financial interests. As the next chapter will show, the same pattern is repeated on issues related to human health.