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Deniers persist, despite climate change facts

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If they were not so destructive, the ever-changing storylines employed to deny climate science would almost be comical. The denial sometimes has been bipartisan, but Republicans have been most vocal. It is pushing humanity to the brink of catastrophe.

The deniers' original position was that the Earth's climate was not warming. Some even claimed it was cooling.

When straightforward measurements proved otherwise, deniers started saying that the climate might be changing, but it is natural, not caused by humans.

This was invalidated by research showing that the additional energy being trapped in the atmosphere corresponds almost exactly to the wavelengths of energy captured by carbon dioxide, and that the increased atmospheric carbon was generated by burning fossil fuels and other human activities.

This led deniers to shift their tale to saying that the additional heat won't amount to much, while some even claimed it will be beneficial. I remember hearing a former Eugene assistant city manager openly say that. This was disproved when more frequent extreme weather events caused worsening amounts of damage to people, property and ecosystems.

When no dramatic spikes in global temperatures occurred for a few years, the story became “the warming has stopped.” This was refuted by National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration researchers who showed that, to the contrary, surface temperature had climbed 0.2 of a degree Fahrenheit each decade since 1950, without interruption.

When destructive storms, droughts and heat waves became increasingly alarming, many deniers shifted to arguments such as “we should not cut our emissions until China reduces theirs.” This failed to acknowledge that the United States has contributed almost 30 percent of historic emissions that are disrupting the climate, that we remain the second largest source of global emissions, that our per-capita emissions are three times higher than China’s, and that a big chunk of China’s emissions are generated to produce goods for us.

Intermixed with these narratives have been numerous fake news stories. Just before the 2009 Copenhagen U.N. Climate Summit, unknown deniers released emails pilfered from scientists at the University of East Anglia and claimed they proved those scientists fabricated evidence of human-induced global warming. This was debunked. Another fake news story recently claimed that NOAA scientists had manipulated climate data. It, too, has been proven false.

A number of industries also have tried to turn black into white by proclaiming that, rather than harming the climate, their products and practices are beneficial. The coal industry, for instance, began to promote “clean coal.” Coal has by far the highest carbon content of all fossil fuels. No technology exists to capture the emissions from coal, and those in development are extremely expensive and likely will require huge public subsidies. Clean coal is an oxymoron of epic proportions.

Members of the timber industry in the Northwest claimed that clearcutting forests would benefit the climate because young trees sequester more carbon than older forests, which are stagnant and decaying. This was refuted by research showing that older forests continue to grow and absorb carbon throughout their lives, and store almost twice as much carbon as forests managed on a 100-year rotation. When cut, their carbon is lost for a century or more until new trees grow to equal size, which is becoming increasingly difficult due to warming-driven droughts, wildfires and diseases. Clearcutting also disturbs soils, where more carbon is stored than in trees themselves.

Healthy skepticism is good when it leads to greater clarity. However, even though each storyline has been discredited and so-called scandals shown to be hoaxes, climate denial remains as strong as ever.

Now, Donald Trump, an unabashed climate denier, has been elected president. He named Rex Tillerson, a major funder of climate denial as CEO of Exxon-Mobil, and other deniers to his Cabinet. To confuse the public, they will undoubtedly promote versions of the usual denier narratives. But their actual goal — and a primary purpose of denial all along — will be to block anything that might threaten profits. Along with congressional Republicans, they will gut regulations and shrink U.S. involvement in efforts to reduce emissions as required by international agreements.

All this is occurring after three consecutive record hot years, unprecedented melting in the Arctic, rising sea levels and accelerating ocean acidification. We are in the midst of a civilization-changing event, but these deniers seem to care only about their wealth and power.

Not much time remains to prevent runaway climate disruption. People from both parties who care about their children and grandchildren must demand that Trump and Congress reverse course and aggressively cut emissions to protect the ecological systems that make all life possible.

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