

# DNR purges climate change from web page

## Agency says question a matter of scientific debate

*By Lee Bergquist  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

The state Department of Natural Resources recently scrubbed language from an agency web page on the Great Lakes that said humans and greenhouse gases are the main cause of climate change.

The DNR now says the subject is a matter of scientific debate.

The department made the changes Dec. 21, striking out whole sentences

attributing global warming to human activities and rising levels of carbon dioxide.

It's the most recent example of the DNR removing information related to climate change. More broadly, the changes reflect how the administration of Gov. Scott Walker has de-emphasized the subject since he took office in 2011.

In the latest changes, the DNR says of climate change, "as it has done throughout the centuries, the earth is going through a change. The reasons for this change at this particular time in the earth's long history are being debated and researched by academic entities outside the Department of Natural Resources."

Officials replaced this wording:

"Earth's climate is changing. Human activities that increase heat-trapping ('greenhouse') gases are the main cause."

The old text goes on to say "scientists agree" that the Great Lakes region will see longer summers and shorter winters, decreased ice cover and changes in rain and snow patterns "if climate change patterns continue."

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Blogger Jim Rowen, a critic of the Walker administration’s environmental policies, first reported the revised passages Monday.

DNR spokesman Jim Dick said in an email that the “updated page reflects our position on this topic that we have communicated for years, that our agency regularly must respond to a variety of environmental and human stressors from drought, flooding, wind events to changing demographics.

“Our agency must be ready to respond to each of these challenges. Adaptation has been our position on this topic.

“As you know the causes and effects of any changes in climate are still being debated and research on the matter is being done in academic circles outside DNR.”

While some scientists have painted doubt for the reason why the planet is warming, the vast majority of climate scientists agree that burning of fossil fuels has increased global greenhouses gases in the atmosphere and has caused warming.

A 2014 United Nations report that surveyed the latest science of climate change found “human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history.”

The report—the U.N.’s fifth since 1990—also found “warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and (oceans) have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen.”

Under Walker, climate issues have not been a high priority. He has been critical of President Barack Obama’s climate initiatives. Republican Attorney General Brad Schimel joined other likeminded states in 2015 in a federal lawsuit opposing regulations to limit carbon emissions from power plants.

The DNR also has recently removed a teaching guide on climate change from its website, and according to the agency, it is turning it over to UW-Stevens Point.

In recent years, DNR officials have removed other information devoted to global warming, but other information is still intact.

For example, a web page devoted to landfills and waste says, “Climate change poses

a serious threat.”

“We now have a clearer understanding of the role waste and materials management plays in global climate change and, most importantly, the opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions ...”

In contrast, the DNR has taken down a trove of information from former Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle’s Task Force on Global Warming. The 2008 report, which sought ways to reduce carbon emissions, can still be found on an online archive known as the Wayback Machine.

Minnesota and Michigan maintain extensive information on climate change and its effect at their respective environmental agencies.

Paul Robbins, director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at UWMadison, said he is not surprised by the alterations.

“When climate change gets so politicized, you can imagine agencies and its leaders haggling over wording,” he said.

Robbins said UW scientists have worked with DNR field staff for years on how to adapt to a warming climate, although with shrinking DNR budgets, “it’s not as high of a priority as it was in the past.”

Bill Davis, president of the John Muir chapter of the Sierra Club in Madison, described the scrubbing as “unfortunate, but not surprising—they’ve been doing it pretty much since Walker got into office.

“This is an asset, paid for with public funds, and the fact it was scrubbed off its website is not good public policy.”

Said Joel Brammeier, president of Chicago-based Alliance for the Great Lakes:

“I don’t understand the need for the changes. To me, it looks like they are trying to cover up a debate that really isn’t happening.”

Climate change is affecting the Great Lakes, Brammeier said, citing as one example Green Bay’s dead zone, which has been linked to runoff and warm summer water temperatures.

Dick, the DNR spokesman, said the agency has two UWMadison links on climate change on its updated Great Lakes page.

He also emphasized the agency is working on ways Wisconsin can adjust to a

changing climate.