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Outlook cloudy on climate

By [Eric Deggans](#), Times TV/Media Critic

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The question comes at Denis Phillips several times a day, delivered by e-mail from curious viewers struggling with the longest cold snap the Tampa Bay area has seen in a while.

From their end of the send button, it's a simple inquiry. But Phillips, chief meteorologist at Tampa ABC affiliate WFTS-Ch. 28, knows there is no such thing when the question involves whether global warming actually exists.

"The thing I typically say is, there's a lot of people who are passionate on both sides of the argument, but nobody knows yet," said Phillips, estimating he gets about five e-mails a day on the topic. "You can look at what's going into the atmosphere and we see it's having an effect on components of the atmosphere. But there's nobody who can tell you what that means."

Phillips' caution makes sense; he's not only a weather forecaster, but a local TV personality who wants the widest possible audience. So a contentious, confusing topic like global warming must sometimes feel like a minefield.

Which may also explain why most of the area's other chief TV meteorologists displayed the same sort of ambivalence — while admitting they are also asked about it all the time.

In fact, just one forecaster among the five chief meteorologists at the Tampa Bay area's top TV news outlets agreed with the conclusions issued years ago by the American Meteorological Society and the global Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change:

Namely, that the planet's temperature is warming and man is contributing to it.

"I haven't worked in a weather department yet where there wasn't a split decision on the topic," said Tammie Souza, chief meteorologist at St. Petersburg CBS affiliate WTSP-Ch. 10, who blames political interests for distorting the debate. "Personally, I think it's obvious our climate is changing ... and man has something to do with the warmup. But the minute you get government involved and money involved, the simple facts are blurred all over the place."

The issue emerges as a long-simmering debate between meteorologists and climatologists surfaces again — this time, courtesy of a story in the *Columbia Journalism Review* called "Hot Air,"

subtitled "Why don't TV weathermen believe in climate change?"

Opening with a vivid description of longtime climate change critic and San Diego weatherman John Coleman, the story describes an Emory University survey of 121 TV meteorologists, revealing that 29 percent of them not only disbelieved in global warming but agreed with Coleman's contention that it was a scam.

Part of the problem, the story suggests, may be in the difference between climatologists, who look at the long-term effects of weather patterns over a long time period, and meteorologists, who try to predict what weather will do today, tomorrow and next week.

Meteorologists, focused on short-term computer models which can be notoriously inaccurate when predicting weather even a week in the future, seem to instinctively doubt conclusions based on data over a longer period. Although the issues involved in the global warming debate fall more to areas of climatologists' expertise, Souza compared it to "a heart surgeon looking at something a brain surgeon would do. ... You have to step outside your expertise a bit, do some research and look up the numbers yourself."

Because TV meteorologists are often the only weather scientists the public knows by name, their skepticism can carry a lot of weight — especially in the Tampa Bay area, where the market's longtime emphasis on fielding trained forecasters means every chief meteorologist bears the AMS's prized seal of approval.

"My biggest problem with all this is people who confuse climate and weather ... climate is what you expect and weather is what you get," said Mike Clay, chief meteorologist at local cable newschannel Bay News 9, an admitted global warming skeptic. "It's just as incorrect for someone to stand up and say Hurricane Katrina was caused by global warming as it is for someone else to say cold weather disproves it."

Clay said he is concerned about all of the competing political agendas in the global warming debate, admitting a suspicion of the concept bordering on cynicism. "I first heard about global warming in a conference I attended in 1988," he said. "I remember someone saying 'Be wary of (researchers) who tell you there's a problem, because if they tell you there's no problem, their (research funding) goes away.' "

Phillips and WFLA-Ch. 8 forecaster Steve Jerve have plopped themselves in the middle, unconvinced that enough evidence exists that the planet's temperature is rising and such a shift is definitely caused by man.

"Mostly I'm trying to get Saturday right," said Jerve, stressing a focus on his own job at Tampa's NBC affiliate. "And that can be a damn challenge."

WTSP's Souza noted that forecasters can also be affected by the stance of the stations that employ them. When she worked for an NBC station in Chicago, her stories about global warming were welcomed by a corporation aggressively branding itself as green-friendly.

"Then I went to Fox (affiliate WFLD-TV), and they said, 'Don't even mention it on air,' " she said.

Indeed, the market's best-known skeptic on global warming, WTVT-Ch. 13 forecaster Paul Dellegatto, is also the only chief meteorologist in the Tampa Bay area who did not speak on the issue for this story. A New York-based spokeswoman for WTVT, which is owned by Fox Corp., said the forecaster would not comment.

Perhaps that's because last year, Dellegatto's offhand comments about global warming during a forecast drew the ire of liberal lion and MSNBC pundit Keith Olbermann, who accused the meteorologist of slipping "denial propaganda" into the "local freaking weather forecast."

Olbermann said Dellegatto noted a cold snap in several cities, quoting the forecaster saying, "I just think the whole global warming theory is tough to see based on current calculations." For that statement, Olbermann named the Tampa forecaster in his nightly Worst Persons in the World segment.

"You can't take one of a series of weather events and make conclusions about our long-term climate," said David Zierden, Florida's state climatologist and a scientist at the Center For Ocean-Atmospheric Prediction Studies at Florida State University. "It just doesn't work."

Zierden noted that climate scientists have agreed on a few broad conclusions: that there has been an increase in the global average temperature since the mid 20th century, that greenhouse gases such as the pollutants from burning fossil fuels are very likely the cause and that this is a trend which will continue into the future without a change.

What is less certain: what that change means. Will it bring the flooded coastlines and melted icecaps depicted in some films? Will it create more hurricanes and weather emergencies? Those questions are where consensus breaks down, Zierden said.

Add in a political climate where the war over global warming theory has become a surrogate for public policy clashes between liberal and conservative activists — from attempts to discredit climate change advocate Al Gore to the controversy over e-mails among leading climate scientists obtained by hackers — and you have a situation ripe for misinformation, Zierden said.

His list of leading misconceptions: that this is the first time humans have faced a changing climate; that all effects of potential climate change would be negative; that warming trends cause events such as an active hurricane season or cold snaps — which Zierden traces instead to the El Niño effect of warm ocean currents.

"But going so far as to say (global warming) is a scam is certainly not an accurate representation," said Zierden. "There's volumes and volumes of good science (behind warming theories) that have undergone a peer-review process."

Still, in a TV environment where meteorologists are expected to explain everything from earthquakes in Haiti to Indian Ocean tsunamis, controversies over global warming may be the one weather-related area where some local meteorologists decline to tread.

"I don't talk about (global warming) on television ... because I don't see it as part of my short-term forecast," said WFLA's Jerve. "I don't think it's good for a scientist to talk about an opinion."

*Times researcher Will Gorham contributed to this report. Eric Deggans can be reached at (727) 893-8521 or deggans@sptimes.com. See *The Feed* blog at blogs.tampabay.com/media.*

A survey of 121 American TV weather forecasters on their views about global warming cited in a recent *Columbia Journal Review* article found that:

29 percent of them believed that global warming is a scam.

24 percent of them believed that humans are responsible for most of the change in climate over the past half century.

25 percent are "neutral" on the issue of global warming.

Read the original article at tinyurl.com/yafeu3h

What Tampa Bay TV stations' chief meteorologists say on the matter:

Denis Phillips, Tampa ABC affiliate WFTS-Ch. 28: "Nobody knows yet."

Tammie Souza, St. Petersburg CBS affiliate WTSP-Ch. 10: "It's obvious our climate is changing."

Mike Clay, Bay News 9, is an admitted global warming skeptic who says the competing political interests make him suspicious.

Steve Jerve, Tampa NBC affiliate WFLA-Ch. 8: "Mostly I'm trying to get Saturday right."

Paul Dellegatto, Fox affiliate WTVT-Ch. 13: The market's best-known skeptic on global warming, he did not speak on the issue for this story.

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