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Climatologists strive to regain public trust

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Slowly and tentatively, they engage their critics and release their data

BY JOHN M. BRODER

For months, climate scientists have taken a vicious beating in the media and on the Internet, accused of hiding data, covering up errors and suppressing alternate views.

Their response until now has largely been to assert the legitimacy of the vast body of climate science and to mock their critics as cranks and know-nothings.

But the volume of criticism and the depth of doubt have only grown, and many scientists now realize they are facing a crisis of public confidence and have to fight back. Slowly, tentatively and grudgingly, they are beginning to engage their critics, open up their data and reshape the way they conduct their work.

The official British climate agency is undertaking a complete review of its global temperature data and will make its records and analysis fully public for the first time. The United Nations panel on climate change will accept external oversight of its research practices, also for the first time. Two universities are investigating the work of top climate scientists to determine whether they have violated academic standards or undermined faith in science. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States is preparing to publish a paper for the public outlining what is known — and not known — about changes to the global climate.

A vigorous debate is under way among climate scientists themselves on how to make their work more transparent and how to regain public confidence.

"We need to acknowledge the errors and help turn attention from what's happening in the blogosphere to what's happening in the atmosphere," said Peter C. Frumhoff, chief scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The unauthorized release last autumn of hundreds of e-mail messages from a major climate research center in England and more recent disclosures of a handful of errors in a supposedly authoritative U.N. report on climate change have created what a number of top scientists say is a major breach of faith in their research. They say the uproar threatens to undermine decades of work and has badly damaged public trust in the scientific enterprise.

Ralph J. Cicerone, president of the National Academy of Sciences, one of the most prestigious scientific bodies in the United States, said that there was a danger that the distrust of climate science could mushroom into doubts about

scientific inquiry more broadly. He added that scientists should ensure that all their data and analysis methods are made freely accessible to the public, not tightly held within the scientific priesthood.

Leaders of a number of major scientific agencies have also begun to respond to critics. Jane Lubchenco, head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the United States, said she was creating a new climate service and Web portal to help the public better understand climate science. Vicky Pope, chief of climate change advice at the British Meteorological Office, which is under fire for the quality and openness of its temperature records, said that the office would conduct a wholesale review of its climate data and make all of its source material and analysis publicly available.

Pennsylvania State University and the University of East Anglia in England are conducting investigations of top climate scientists at their institutions whose e-mail messages raised questions about their scientific integrity. A preliminary Penn State inquiry cleared Michael E. Mann, a top climatologist there, of the most serious charges, but officials are continuing to look into whether his actions undermined public faith in climate science.

No scientific body is under more hostile scrutiny than the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which compiles the climate research of hundreds of scientists around the globe into periodic reports intended to be the definitive statement of the science and a guide for policy makers. Critics have pounced on several relatively minor errors in its most recent report and charges of conflict of interest against its leader, Rajendra K. Pachauri, to call for an investigation.

On Saturday, after weeks of refusing to engage critics, the I.P.C.C. announced that it was asking for the creation of an independent panel to review its research procedures to try to eliminate bias and errors from future reports.

But such steps are unlikely to silence critics of the panel and of the scientists who contribute to it. Sarah Palin, the defeated Republican vice-presidential candidate, recently referred to global warming studies as "snake-oil science."

Judith A. Curry, professor of Earth and atmospheric sciences at the Georgia Institute of Technology, advocates opening up scientific papers to a wider audience, publishing them on the Internet and allowing critics to question them and forcing authors to defend them outside the closed fraternity of climate scientists.

"When a scientist issues a relevant paper, put it out on the blogosphere, hang around and debate it for a few hours," she said. "It would go a long way to educating the public and giving our critics the respect they want. I think it would go a long way."