

Climate-Change Debate Is Heating Up in Deep Freeze

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WASHINGTON — As millions of people along the East Coast hole up in their snowbound homes, the two sides in the climate-change debate are seizing on the mounting drifts to bolster their arguments.

Skeptics of [global warming](#) are using the record-setting snows to mock those who warn of dangerous human-driven climate change — this looks more like global cooling, they taunt.

Most climate scientists respond that the ferocious storms are consistent with forecasts that a heating planet will produce more frequent and more intense weather events.

But some independent climate experts say the blizzards in the Northeast no more prove that the planet is cooling than the lack of snow in Vancouver or the downpours in Southern California prove that it is warming.

As an illustration of their point of view, the family of Senator [James M. Inhofe](#), Republican of Oklahoma, a leading climate skeptic in Congress, built a [six-foot-tall igloo](#) on Capitol Hill and put a cardboard sign on top that read “[Al Gore](#)’s New Home.”

The extreme weather, Mr. Inhofe said by e-mail, reinforced doubts about scientists’ conclusion that global warming was “unequivocal” and most likely caused by human activity.

Nonsense, responded Joseph Romm, a climate-change expert and former Energy Department official who [writes about climate issues](#) at the liberal Center for American Progress.

“Ideologues in the Senate keep pushing the anti-scientific disinformation that big snowstorms are evidence against human-caused global warming,” Mr. Romm wrote on Wednesday.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the snowstorm scuffle is playing out against a background of recent climate controversies: In recent months, global-warming critics have assailed a [2007 report](#) by the [United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) and have

claimed that e-mail messages and documents plucked from a server at a climate research center in Britain raise doubts about the academic integrity of some climate scientists. Earlier this week, [Rush Limbaugh](#) and other conservative commentators made light of the fact that the announcement of the creation of a new federal climate service on Monday had to be conducted by conference call, rather than news conference, because the federal government was shuttered by the storm.

[Matt Drudge](#), who delights in tweaking climate-change enthusiasts, noted on his [Web site](#) that a Senate hearing on global warming this week was canceled because of the weather.

As the first blizzard howled last weekend, the Virginia [Republican Party](#) put up an advertisement on the Web — titled “12 Inches of Global Warming” — criticizing two Virginia Democrats, Representatives Rick Boucher and Tom Perriello, who voted for the federal [cap-and-trade](#) legislation last year. [The advertisement](#) urges voters to call Mr. Boucher and Mr. Perriello to ask if they will help with the shoveling.

Speculating on the meaning of severe weather events is not new. [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005 and a deadly heat wave in Europe in the summer of 2003 incited similar arguments about what such extremes might — or might not — say about the planet’s climate.

Climate scientists say that no individual episode of severe weather can be attributed to global climate trends, though there is evidence that such events will probably become more frequent as global temperatures rise.

Jeff Masters, a meteorologist who writes on the [Weather Underground blog](#), said that the recent snows do not, by themselves, demonstrate anything about the long-term trajectory of the planet. Climate is, by definition, a measure of decades and centuries, not months or years.

But Dr. Masters also said that government and academic studies had consistently predicted an increasing frequency of just these kinds of record-setting storms, because warmer air carries more moisture.

“Of course,” he wrote on his blog Wednesday as new snows produced white-out conditions in much of the Eastern half of the country, “both climate-change contrarians and climate-change scientists agree that no single weather event can be blamed on climate change.

“However,” he continued, “one can ‘load the dice’ in favor of events that used to be rare — or unheard of — if the climate is changing to a new state.”

A federal government report issued last year, intended to be the authoritative statement of known climate trends in the United States, pointed to the likelihood of more frequent snowstorms in the Northeast and less frequent snow in the South and Southeast as a result of long-term temperature and precipitation patterns. The [Climate Impacts report](#), from the multiagency United States Global Change Research Program, also projected more intense drought in the Southwest and more powerful Gulf Coast [hurricanes](#) because of warming.

In other words, if the government scientists are correct, look for more snow.