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OPINION

ALASKA'S GOVERNOR IS SABOTAGING A CRUCIAL TOOL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE | OPINION

MICHAEL E. MANN

ON 8/15/19 AT 6:00 AM EDT





OPINION

CLIMATE CHANGE

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The unprecedented spate of superstorms, heat waves, wildfires and floods we've seen in recent summers bear the fingerprint of human-caused climate change. This summer is no different.

A historic heat dome has caused massive wildfires across the Arctic and record melting in Greenland. In July alone (which now appears to be the hottest month ever recorded on this planet), enough Greenland ice melted into the ocean to raise sea levels 0.02 inches.

The Arctic is the canary in the coal mine when it comes to human-caused planetary warming, and Alaska—which is currently suffering through an "off the charts" sweltering summer—is a massive field site for observing and understanding it. Its flagship university, the University of Alaska (UA), is home to one of the world's leading scientific research centers for the study of climate change, the International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska–Fairbanks.

Researchers there have been able to carefully document the changing polar climate, thanks to important work done by their faculty and graduate students, who collect data on permafrost, ice packs and water levels, as well as other key climate diagnostics.

But a major budget fight in Alaska now threatens to disrupt this vital data collection and scatter the researchers, knocking out a crucial tool used worldwide to track our planet's health.

As part of an unprecedented round of budget cuts that would also weaken social services across Alaska, Republican Governor Mike Dunleavy threatened to reduce UA's state funding by a whopping 41 percent, with up to a third of that money specifically snatched from the research mission of the university system.

Amid the backlash, a new signed deal was suddenly announced on Tuesday between the governor and the UA Board of Regents chairman, John Davies; the cuts would be somewhat smaller than Dunleavy originally wanted and spread out over three years. But result will remain almost certain tremendous damage to the UA system.

As one state senator told an Alaskan newspaper, "I think the regents, in the position they're at, had a gun to their head and basically agreed to the words that were on the page.

Beyond the obvious harm to state residents dependent on government aid, these cuts, by deliberately targeting the Arctic Research program, directly endanger the world's ability to track and fight the effects of climate change.

Destroying a crown jewel in your state's higher education system—one that attracts talent and trains the next generation of researchers—makes little sense on its face, but recent events suggest that this may be the governor's goal. After pushing through the unprecedented budget cuts, Dunleavy bargained with the UA's Board of Regents by offering to stagger them over several years—his original offer required the board to cut \$35 million in research and implement those cuts first, with nearly 58 percent of the research funding cuts coming from the University of Alaska–Fairbanks. With this new signed contract between the Board of Regents and the governor, it's unclear whether it's still required that the cuts to research funding come first, or how these cuts will shape the UA system.

While Dunleavy hasn't outright said that he wants research budget cuts to impact national and international climate change study, it certainly looks that way. Institutions of higher education—in Alaska or any state—cannot function as organs for the political whims of elected politicians.

In attempting to dictate how cuts are distributed, the governor is grossly overstepping his role. He's not meant to serve as a one-man committee determining how the UA system manages its budget. In fact, in Alaska, the state constitution specifically invests in the Board of Regents—not the governor—the power to determine the university's budget and, through that, its priorities.

Not surprisingly, these proposed cuts were offered without even consulting the UA faculty. The governor's plan also violates widely observed principles of academic freedom and shared governance, which gives the faculty a primary role in decisions about research and teaching.

As one faculty member told an Alaskan newspaper, "I find it odd that we have politicians now making decisions about the future of the university. This really makes me feel like we're not in the driver's seat anymore; it's now in the hands of politicians and think tanks that are very politically aligned with a very conservative view of what education should be."

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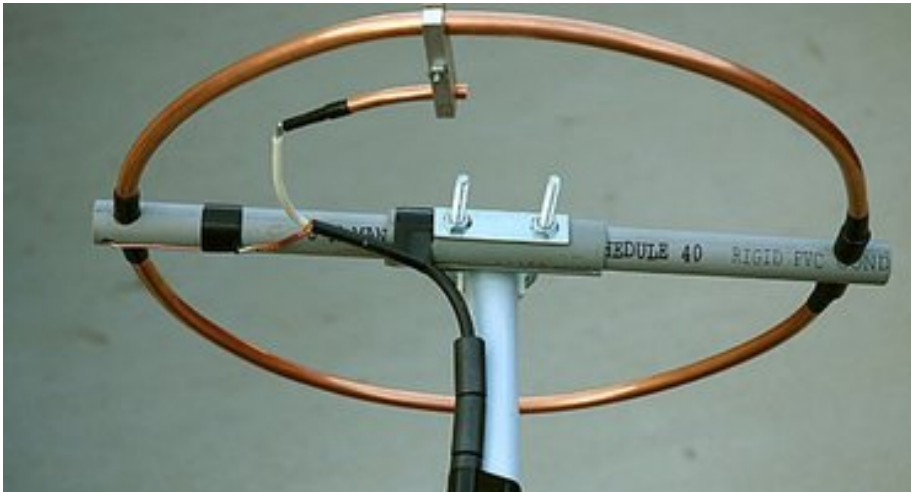


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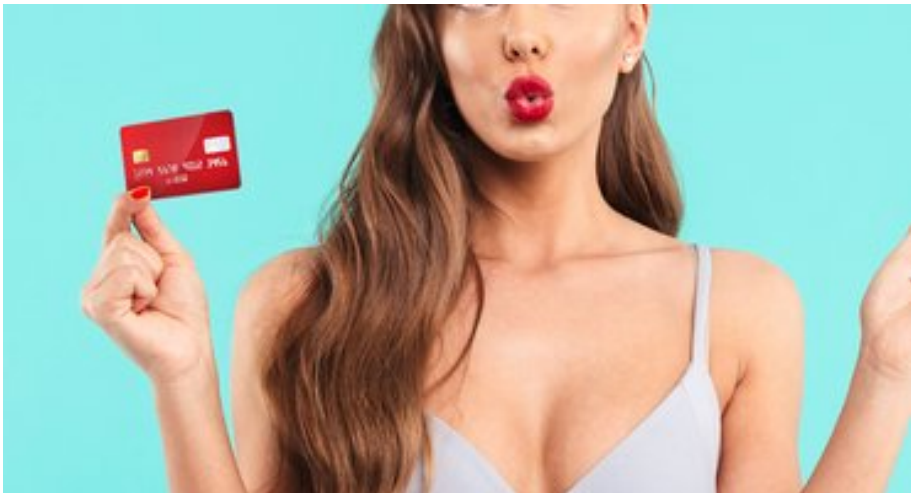
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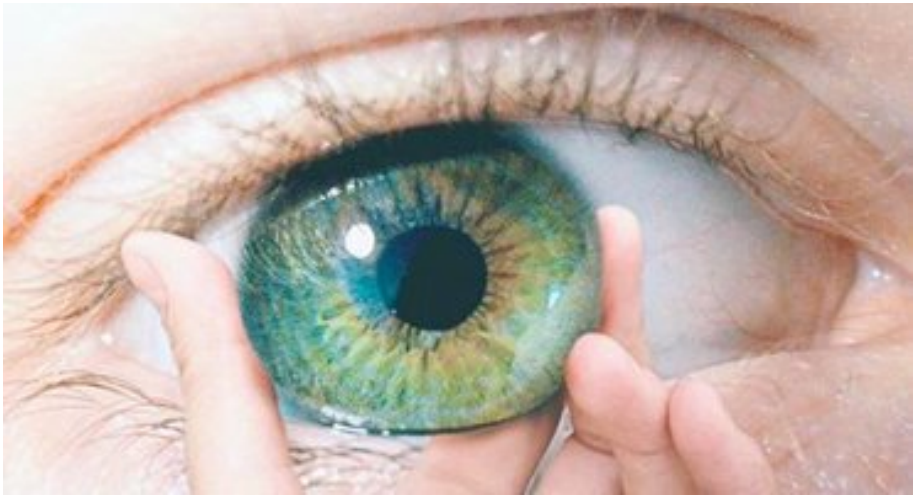


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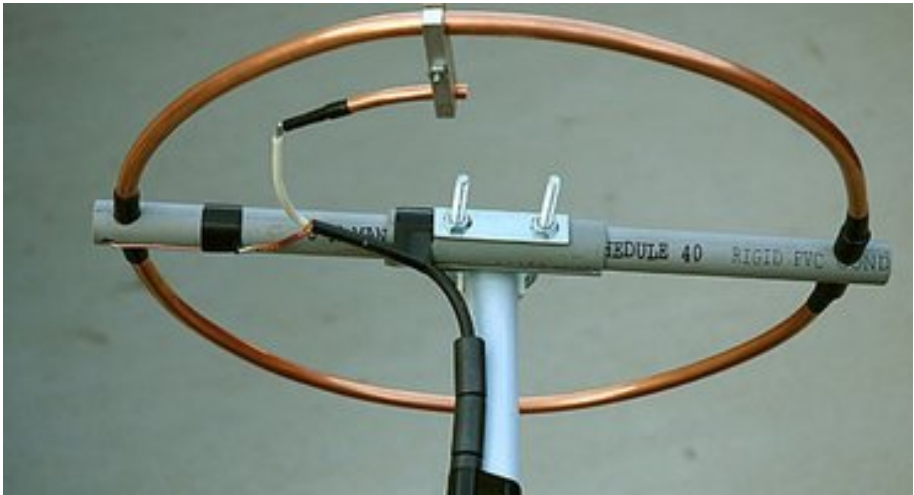
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People relax along a creek below the Byron Glacier on July 4 near Portage Lake in Girdwood, Alaska, as the state braced for record-warm temperatures and dry conditions.

LANCE KING/GETTY

Dunleavy has stated reasons for why he's demanding the Board of Regents cut so much from their research mission. Curiously, not among them is (A) the fact that he has a disturbing history of hostility toward climate research and (B) a very close relationship with the Koch brothers, the primary funders of climate change denialism.

Climate researchers and scientists across the United States and the world are watching what happens to the Arctic Research program. While the budget fight in Alaska is of crucial importance to state residents, it's equally important to the world that UA's climate research isn't gutted. And perhaps even more important, we cannot allow a precedent to be established for oil-soaked politicians and anti-science plutocrats to target our flagship research universities simply because they don't like their findings. Our planet hangs in the balance.

Michael E. Mann is distinguished professor of atmospheric science at Pennsylvania State University and director of the Penn State Earth System Science Center. He also serves on the American Association of University Professors' Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure.

The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.

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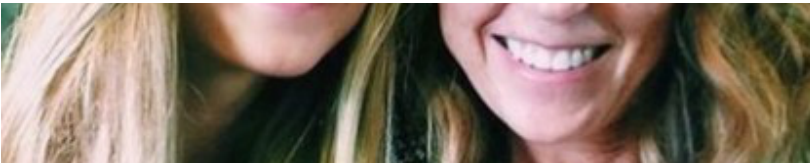
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I would trust the opinions of those wh



Conversation (11)



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Well of course! The people who stand to make the most money off of denying climate change don't want any more research.....it will only continue to prove them wrong!



This is a direct attack on science by Big Business via of their Republican stooges in public office.

Reply 5 Likes  



DaveOz

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Common-sensed Amercans are seeing the farce and hoax involved in the climate change fiasco. Scientists have become English experts, changing the name from global warming to paleoclimatology, Climate variability, *anthropogenic caused, blah blah blah...just more blather to keep the alarmists fresh with new terminology and fear.*

Reply 2 Likes  



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Right-wingers put their heads in the sand and willfully ignore the obvious because the Big Polluters scare them into believing that curbing emissions will cost them money, when in reality they're already paying the costs of climate change.....and that bill will continue to rise.

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This is a sad joke played on gullible masses, the Earth has been going through these shifts in climate for hundreds of thousands of years. The earth has gone through 5 ice ages in the last 2.4 billion years. Some scientists believe that an increase in global temperature, as we are now experiencing, could be a sign of an impending ice age. I would honestly believe that explanation, as it is based on a track record Instead of what the crazy masses are pushing.

To be blunt, Big Business make more money faking a crisis to make you buy there crap that doesn't really work, just so you can feel good about yourself for making a change for the environment. This is the kind of backwards thinking that leads you to buy a hybrid or electric car whose production cycle alone causes more environmental damage that a diesel burning Hummer H-1 creates in it's entire life cycle, from creation to the scrap yard. Global worming is greatest ponzi scheme in the world, because you don't even have to promise high rates of return with little risk.

Look, if you don't really know what's going on, just admit it instead of going with what everyone else thinks. If someone has to pull on your emotions to make you believe them instead of giving you hard long term evidence (older than just 100 years), than most likely they are feeding you B.S. The Earth has been around for Billions of years. If giant dinosaur farts couldn't kill life on Earth what makes you think cow farts can?

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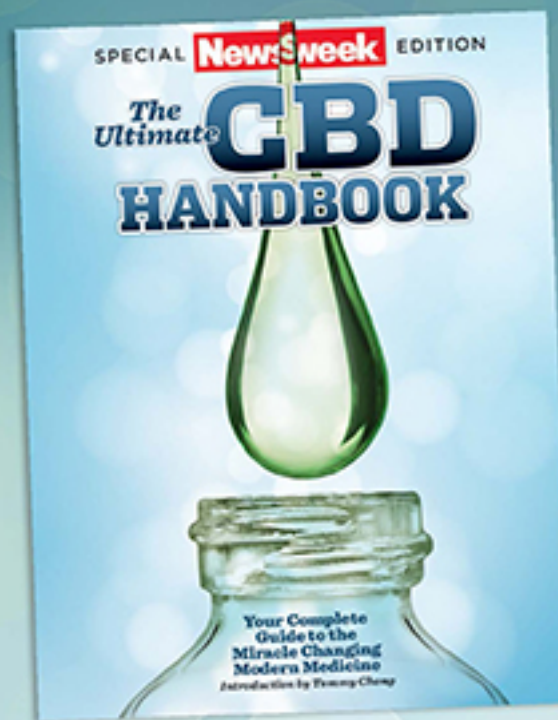
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