

# On warming, Williams is 'just plain wrong'

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By Thomas Crowley : Guest columnist  
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I used to enjoy reading Walter Williams' op-ed pieces for a refreshingly different viewpoint on some topics I was not familiar with. But in a recent article in The Herald-Sun, Williams devoted a third of his piece to a subject I know something about -- global warming -- and there I found that his points were both superficial and just plain wrong.

Williams cites some global warming critiques from ABC's 20/20 anchorman John Stossel's book "Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity," such as mid-20th century warming was as large as late-20th century warming, yet there were much more fossil fuels burned in the late 20th century. Stossel's and Williams' implication is that global warming is bogus.

However, Stossel does not acknowledge what everyone working on global warming knows, i.e., that there have been very large emissions in sun-reflecting atmospheric aerosols in the late 20th century that have dampened the warming response to increased carbon dioxide. These aerosols result from increased smokestack emissions, biomass burning, and an unusual cluster of moderately powerful volcanic eruptions. In the short run we know that these emissions can retard warming, but we also know that carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere 1,000 times longer than the aerosols, so ultimately the carbon dioxide will win out. In fact it is probably not coincidental that the very rapid warming in the last decade has been partly due the absence of significant volcanism during that time. We have every reason to expect this warming to increase.

Williams also cites a Harvard astrophysicist discussing plant responses to carbon dioxide. Putting aside the point that this is like having a brain specialist commenting knowledgeably on cardiology, climate scientists are again well aware of this issue but are also aware that what happens in a plant greenhouse does not necessarily happen in the real world. For example, there are no guarantees that critical plant

nutrients such as nitrogen can keep up with the "CO2 fertilization" potential. Insect pests may also be very happy in a warmer world, thus eating into some of the greater biomass produced by carbon dioxide.

Finally, Stossel and Williams really go out on a limb in talking about how increasing carbon dioxide will prevent the next ice age. Putting aside the fact that most scientists believe the next ice age would not start anyway for another 10,000-30,000 years, we have good reason to believe that the carbon dioxide level of the atmosphere is already at a sufficient level to prevent the next ice age. What we are really worried about is that we have used only 5 percent of the available fossil fuel reservoir and are already experiencing notable warming. What will happen if we don't do anything at all about the other 95 percent?

I therefore came to conclude that if Williams is wrong on these "facts," then maybe some of the other statements in his piece are misleading. For example, he points out that Niger's population density is only one-third of the United States, so therefore there should be no problem with overpopulation. Williams fails to point out that Niger is in the Sahara Desert, so it would be ridiculous to expect a population density as high as the United States. The problem with Niger is that the population is too high for the agricultural potential that can sustain it.

Williams concludes his listing of pseudo-facts to indulge in the standard stereotyped vilifying of "uninformed media and academic elite." But the criticisms above indicate that Williams is part of the "uninformed media," and the public should be grateful that informed academics are around who can dispel the type of drivel that he and Stossel dispense with such confidence.

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