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Obama and Geo-engineering? Yes, you can – but don't!

Reported musing by Obama Advisor is dangerous

OTTAWA, April 8, 2009 – Today's reports¹ from an Associated Press interview with U.S. Chief Science Advisor John Holdren claiming that the White House could now be taking a serious look at geo-engineering – including the radical proposal to shoot nanoparticles of sulphate into the earth's atmosphere – are causing alarm around the world. "If this is somebody's trial balloon to test Obama's acceptance of geo-engineering, the White House should shoot it down immediately," says Pat Mooney, executive director of ETC Group, an Ottawa-based civil society organization that has been monitoring geo-engineering technologies since 2006. Geo-engineering refers to large-scale, intentional manipulations of the planet's climate and other systems.

Holdren is quoted as saying that an experimental measure such as shooting sulphate into the atmosphere has "got to be looked at," adding, "we don't have the luxury of taking any approach off the table." As reported, these comments seem to signal a change from earlier writings in which Holdren warned of "serious side effects" of geo-engineering.²

"The most disturbing aspect of geo-engineering is that unlike the Kyoto Protocol, which requires a broad consensus to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, geoengineering is a luxury afforded only to superpowers, who can unilaterally decide to adjust the earth's climate to their liking. That John Holdren is reported as countenancing shooting sulphate nanoparticles into the atmosphere is especially alarming."

"The potential side effects of polluting the upper atmosphere with sulphates could be devastating – ranging from ozone depletion and increased drought to threats to health," explains Jim Thomas of ETC Group. "Worst of all, once governments start shooting up these particles into the atmosphere, we may find ourselves addicted. Stopping would prompt a massive and sudden jump in temperature. Of all the wacky geo-engineering schemes out there, this one is probably the most dangerous and the most unjust. It would be irresponsible to contemplate real-world testing of this technology."

Holdren's statement is being received with glee by geo-engineers who have been campaigning for more research dollars and a higher public profile. This week a group of geo-engineers are reportedly sending a letter to the Obama administration asking that geo-

¹ Seth Borenstein, "Obama looks at climate engineering," *Associated Press*, 8th April 2009, on the Internet at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hm1kMpA2nQALOfQL8Y8PxxTHNVtgD97EG5200>

² John Holdren, "The Energy Innovation Imperative: Addressing Oil Dependence, Climate Change, and Other 21st Century Energy Challenges," *Innovations*, vol.1, no. 2, pp. 3-23, Spring 2006.

engineering be placed on the agenda for the preparatory meeting of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate being convened April 27-28th in Washington D.C.³ The looming failure of the Kyoto Protocol and uncertain outcome of the Copenhagen climate negotiations in December have politicians stargazing, hoping to find anything that could appear to be a winning strategy in the fight against climate change.

“The White House must confirm that Barack Obama's meeting with representatives of the sixteen largest economies to discuss climate change later this month is not an attempt to convene some new 'coalition of the willing' to reengineer the planet,” asserts Diana Bronson of ETC Group. “If the United States does indeed head down the geo-engineering path they could find themselves in breach of international law under the UN's ENMOD Convention [Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques]. If the White House wants to be constructive, it should work with the United Nations to ensure that appropriate oversight structures are in place to prevent unilateral deployment of geo-engineering. Meanwhile, geo-engineering schemes, including real world field trials, should be vigorously opposed.”

The AP's interview with John Holdren comes on the heels of reports from the UK suggesting that both the government and the Royal Society are giving geoengineering a sympathetic hearing. Earlier this week, ETC Group sent a submission to the Royal Society on the question of governance and geo-engineering. ETC Group's submission is available here: http://www.etcgroup.org/en/materials/publications.html?pub_id=742

ETC Group is also sponsoring a “Pie-in-the-Sky” contest to highlight the absurdity of geo-engineering schemes. Entries have been received from 13 countries and the winner will be announced on Earth Day (April 22).

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³ A draft of the open letter from Geo-Engineers to the Major Economies Forum on Energy And Climate is online at http://groups.google.com/group/geoengineering/browse_thread/thread/c5bf988ac2fb27b1/15123d8b6e0dd0b5