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- [TV](#)
- |
- [RADIO](#)
- |
- [COMMUNITY](#)
- |
- [NEWS](#)
- |
- [ARTS](#)
- |
- [FOOD](#)
- |
- [SCIENCE](#)
- |
- [EDUCATION](#)
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- [Tag Cloud](#)
- [Map: Rising Sun](#)

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- [California Cities Get High Marks for Energy Efficiency](#)
- [Environmental Risks of "Geoengineering"](#)
- [Concerns Abound as Geoengineering Conference Opens](#)
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- [Curbing Range Anxiety](#)
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- [Air](#)
- [Alpine](#)
- [Beliefs](#)
- [Coastal](#)
- [Conservation](#)
- [COP15](#)
- [Cryosphere](#)
- [Desert](#)
- [Economics](#)
- [Ecosystems](#)
- [Emissions](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Fisheries](#)
- [Health](#)

- [Interactive](#)
- [International](#)
- [Oceans](#)
- [Policy](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Temperature](#)
- [Transportation](#)
- [Uncategorized](#)
- [Urban Planning](#)
- [Warming](#)
- [Water](#)
- [Wetlands](#)
- [Wildfire](#)
- [Wildlife](#)

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- [March 2010](#)
- [February 2010](#)
- [January 2010](#)
- [December 2009](#)
- [November 2009](#)
- [October 2009](#)
- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)

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- [Environment 360](#)
- [Green Inc.](#)
- [Sierra Summit](#)

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- [Science Blogs](#)

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- [It's Getting Hot in Here](#)
- [Treehugger](#)

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## Concerns Abound as Geoengineering Conference Opens

March 21, 2010 · Posted By Gretchen Weber · Filed Under [Policy](#), [Technology](#)



Photo: Craig Miller

This week in Monterey, an international group of scientists and policymakers are gathering to hash out some ground rules for experimenting with climate intervention, or "geoengineering"—what many are calling "[Plan B](#)" for dealing with climate change.

There are two main categories of geoengineering strategies: one focuses on blocking solar radiation that reaches the Earth's surface, the other aims to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. The goal of both is to pull an emergency brake on global warming, using technology that is, in many cases, experimental.

Ideas for blocking the sun include [science-fiction-sounding ideas](#) like spraying sulfur aerosol into the stratosphere (which we explore in a [radio feature](#) on [The California Report](#)), launching reflectors into orbit, and spraying seawater at clouds to make them brighter and more reflective.

Because much of the technology remains untested, and because, given the complexities of the climate system there's no real way to test them out in a lab, (not to mention the philosophical issue of interfering in such a direct way with the Earth), the very idea of geoengineering is [controversial](#) (watch this space for more about that in the week ahead) But as it turns out, this week's conference in Monterey is shaping up to be [controversial on its own](#).

The stated goal of the [Asilomar International Conference on Climate Intervention Technologies](#) is "to develop norms and guidelines for controlled experimentation on climate engineering or intervention techniques." Some [big names](#) in climate circles are expected to be in attendance, including the [Climate Institute's Michael McCracken](#), who is chairing the conference, and former IPCC lead author [Richard Somerville](#), now retired from Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla.

Other leading scientists, however, have chosen to skip the conference, including Stanford's Ken Caldeira, [Martin Bunzl](#), who directs the Rutgers Initiative on Climate Change and Social Policy, and [Braden Allenby](#), a professor of Engineering and Ethics at Arizona State University, both of whom participated in a lively panel on geoengineering at the AAAS annual meeting in February. Bunzl told Climate Watch Senior Editor Craig Miller that the five-day event was too much time to devote to the topic, and Allenby called the conference premature.

Many scientists say that more research needs to be done to determine whether these strategies would even work, before we start hashing out how to deploy them, even if only on a limited, experimental basis. Others fear a focus on intervention might lead to complacency and distract from the immediate task of [reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions](#).

The latest controversy surrounding the conference, however, revolves around accusations of a conflict of interest. [The Climate Response Fund](#) (CRF), which is organizing the conference, has ties to a geoengineering firm, San Francisco-based [Climos](#). Climate blogger Joe Romm (who is admittedly "not a fan of geoengineering") [writes about these connections in-depth](#) at [Climate Progress](#), and details email exchanges he had on the subject with [Margaret Leinen](#) of the CRF, [David Keith](#) of the University of Calgary and [Caldeira](#) of the Carnegie Institute for Science, all of whom reportedly expressed concerns about the potential conflict of interest (one reason Caldeira [cites](#) for skipping the conference).

Meanwhile organizers will try to enforce media restrictions almost unheard of in the Internet age, including a ban on daily reporting from the conference, and on quoting presenters without their express consent. The rationale was laid out in an email from the conference organizers:

"The conference is designed to allow the conferees to consider multiple points of view during the course of the meetings. Reporting before participants have had the opportunity to consider the full mix of views will necessarily be incomplete and therefore risk being misleading. This also is matter of courtesy to your fellow conferees, will help in maintaining the focus of the discussions and efforts to achieve the Conference objectives, and will help reduce the likelihood that Internet exchanges about the Conference will break out before we all have an opportunity to be participating in them, as appropriate, based on our actual experiences here at Asilomar."

Some form of announcement is scheduled for Friday, when the meeting comes to a close.

Update 3/22/10

The Board of Directors of the Climate Response Fund has issued a [statement](#) addressing the concerns raised about a potential conflict of interest. It states that CRF "will not fund field experiments for any climate intervention technique now or in the future." This [reportedly has assuaged](#) some scientists' (and journalists') concerns about the intentions of the organization and the purpose of the Asilomar conference.

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