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NOVEMBER 6, 2009

March Geoengineering Confab Draws Praise, Criticism

by Eli Kintisch

<http://blogs.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2009/11/march-geoengine.html#more>

Scientists and policy experts will meet in March next year for a 5 day meeting to hash out rules for conducting field experiments on the controversial topic of geoengineering, ScienceInsider has learned. Styled after the landmark 1975 Asilomar conference on recombinant DNA, the conference has drawn support from top climate scientists and environmental groups. But it also faces questions and criticism about its openness and the backgrounds of some of the organizers.

Yesterday's hearing by the House of Representatives Science and Technology Committee—the first by Congress on the topic—underscores the accelerating interest in geoengineering, the deliberate tinkering with the environment to reverse global warming. The March meeting aims to be a forum for “scientists with expertise in climate engineering together with experts on risk management, governance, and ethics,” said marine biologist Margaret Leinen, president of the Climate Response Fund, a new nonprofit set up to support geoengineering research. The Response Fund has partnered with Nobel Prize-winning biologist Paul Berg, who organized the 1975 event at the Asilomar conference center grounds in northern California, where the March event will also be held.

Many scientists believe that small or medium scale field trials may be needed to understand the risks of large-scale geoengineering projects. “There’s a very legitimate concern about whether there would be risks associated with the research itself,” said Leinen. Starting on 22 March, she hopes to convene 150 experts to examine the risks of a variety of different geoengineering methods, ranging from growing algae blooms at sea to sucking carbon dioxide or dimming the sun with particles sprayed into the upper atmosphere.

Michael MacCracken, of the Climate Institute in Washington, D.C., is leading the meeting’s independent scientific organizing committee, which will craft a final document after the meeting. Other organizers include ecologist Thomas Lovejoy of the Heinz Center and Steve Hamburg of the Environmental Defense Fund in New York City, who called the Asilomar meeting “an important and thoughtful conversation about an urgent issue.”

MacCracken wants federal agencies to support field experiments on various questions. “I’d like to have a sort of checklist to be sure that best practices are being followed,” he said. “We need to have this kind of discussion right now, while it’s early.” The international London Convention antidumping treaty is working on specific rules for ocean fertilization techniques.

Critics of the Response Fund and its conference worry about its ties to Climos, a geoengineering startup company started in 2005 by entrepreneur Dan Whaley, Leinen’s son. With Leinen as its chief scientific officer, Climos sought to perform ocean iron fertilization experiments and sell carbon credits it could show it earned.

Facing international opposition to the idea of selling credits for the controversial technique, the firm decided last year to morph into an ocean logistics company, with scientists doing the ocean experiments funded by charity, presumably through Leinen’s nonprofit, or other means. Whaley said he helped conceive of and launch the nonprofit, introducing Leinen to its fundraiser, Danielle Guttman. “Since then I’ve had no role,” he said of the Response Fund. Leinen said she no longer had “any financial interest” in the company, and Whaley agreed.

Since geoengineering involves techniques that could have global repercussions, say experts, it’s particularly important that any discussions about

regulating the new technologies avoid the appearance of possible commercial interests or conflicts. These issues are particularly acute with commercial ocean fertilization.

"It would be better for people with less of an appearance of a conflict of interest [to] play this role," said Ken Caldeira of the Carnegie Institution for Science in Stanford, California, when discussing the Response Fund's role. "There's a perception that you've got a fox in the henhouse—for-profit companies or their nonprofit surrogates looking at governance of geoengineering." Physicist David Keith of the University of Calgary in Canada "welcomes" the effort but called Leinen's nonprofit "nontransparent and appears to be closely tied to Climos, which was conceived to do ocean fertilization for profit. While I am happy to see profit-driven startups drive innovation, I think tying ocean fertilization to carbon credits was a sterling example of how not to govern climate engineering." Read Keith's full statement [here](#).

Posted on November 6, 2009 1:08 PM in Environment/Climate, Top Story | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

#### 1 Comments

By David Grimm on November 17, 2009 12:30 PM

A comment from Margaret Leinen, CRF:

Eli, thank you for your coverage of the Climate Response Fund (CRF) and our upcoming conference at Asilomar on risk assessment and management for climate intervention technology research.

CRF decided some time ago not to make a formal press announcement about our nonprofit (which was incorporated as a US 501c3 organization earlier this year) or about the planned conference until after the Copenhagen climate negotiations were completed. We believe that the focus now should be on support for the earliest and most aggressive possible emissions reductions, and do not want to have discussion of our efforts on climate engineering distract in any way from the important work at Copenhagen.

We want to assure you and your readers that we take the issue of conflict of interest very seriously and have taken steps to eliminate conflicts: I no longer have a position, stock or a share of any intellectual property in Climos. No individual from Climos is on the board of CRF, an employee of CRF or on our group of advisors. We also have a strong organizational conflict of interest policy that would prevent me from participating in any discussion or decision that would benefit Climos in any way. The steps I have taken to separate myself and CRF from Climos meet or exceed conflict of interest policies for the US federal government and exceed those for most academic institutions (which allow intellectual property to be held by researchers while actively performing research in the same area) and most peer-reviewed publications (which do not require disclosure of financial interests other than the source of funding for the material being published). In addition we have not accepted donations from individuals or groups that would profit financially from climate engineering technologies.

The scientific organization of the conference is being conducted by Dr. Michael MacCracken through a grant to the Climate Institute. He has recruited a Scientific Organization Committee that, as you highlighted, is independent. They are responsible for inviting speakers and other participants, setting the agenda and conducting the meeting, and for developing the report of the conference, including its recommendations. If you or your readers want to suggest further steps to avoid conflict of interest, we will be very happy to consider them.

Margaret Leinen  
Founder and CEO, Climate Response Fund

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