

theguardian

Scientists criticise handling of pilot project to 'geoengineer' climate

Advisers call into question decision to announce test date before sufficient public discussion of the project's implications

Camila Ruz

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 17 November 2011 07:44 EST



The project will test the feasibility of injecting particles into the atmosphere to reflect some of the sun's energy.
Photograph: Gallo Images/Getty Images

Governance of the UK's first geoengineering project, which aims to inject particles into the stratosphere to cool the planet, is in need of improvement and researchers should have done more to explain its aims to NGOs and the public, say scientists.

The date and location for the controversial pilot project were announced with great fanfare at the British Science Festival in September, but the scientific advisers to its funding council have criticised the decision to make the test date public before sufficient public discussion about the nature and future implications of the project.

Writing in the journal Nature, Prof Phil Macnaghten, chair of the advisory panel, and Prof Richard Owen, architect of the project's governance process, said that aspects "could have been improved".

"It is vital that we make space to listen to and discuss these questions, and that the debate transparently influences the decisions that are taken," they wrote.

The Stratospheric Particle Injection for Climate Engineering or Spice Project is aimed at testing a method of mitigating the effects of manmade climate change by mimicking the cooling effect of volcanic eruptions. The project is backed by the government-funded Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC), and involves scientists from Cambridge, Oxford, Reading and Bristol universities. They plan to investigate whether a giant balloon and a 20km long hosepipe can inject particles into the stratosphere to reflect some of the sun's energy so reducing warming of the Earth's surface.

The planned first test involved pumping 150 litres of water into the air to study whether the engineering of the project was feasible. The date and timing of the first test was unveiled publicly on 14 September but just two weeks later on 29 September the EPSRC

announced that the project was being delayed for six months to "allow time for more engagement with stakeholders".

The project had attracted a forceful protest campaign from NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and ETC group. A petition signed by more than 50 organisations was handed in the same day as the decision to pause the project was announced by the EPSRC. They objected to the project in part because they feared that a "plan B" approach of engineering the climate will offer politicians an excuse for not taking tough decisions on reducing greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels such as oil, coal and gas.

"There may have been other reasons for pausing the project, I don't know, but certainly the outcry from Friends of the Earth and others undoubtedly would have made them sit back and think," said Mike Childs, head of policy, research and science at Friends of the Earth.

The principal investigator on the project, Matthew Watson, denied that the decision to postpone it was a direct result of the outcry from green groups: "I'm glad the environmental movement have a strong voice," he said, "but the decision was made before any of the really deep green movement got involved." A review of the project two months earlier had concluded that without more public engagement it could not go ahead.

Now the first test of the technology will be put on hold until a second review meeting approves the stakeholder engagement the researchers have done in the intervening time. "We've developed a plan and begun initial discussions with these NGOs so we can get round a table and talk," said Watson.

The controversy surrounding the project is unlikely to fade away. "I think it's a lightning rod for people who don't think it's a good idea and naturally they think the scientists involved want to see this through to deployment and that really isn't the case at all," said Watson. He is not an enthusiast for geoengineering as a policy option and believes that cutting greenhouse gas emissions should be the top priority.

"If the politicians came back from [international climate talks in] Durban with a legally binding agreement on CO₂ emission reduction of some meaning ... that would make research projects like Spice much less important," said Watson. "But each time they don't, when they think of political rather than geological timescales and they think about being re-elected or putting the economy first at any cost then that just makes research into geoengineering even more necessary."

• *This article was amended on 17 November 2011 to identify Matthew Watson, principal investigator on the Spice project.*


Comments

15 comments, displaying

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 **metalsman48**
 17 November 2011 1:25PM

Who is Dr Watson? Sloppy journalism.

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JamesKingsland

17 November 2011 1:40PM



Response to [metalm48](#), 17 November 2011 1:25PM

[Matthew Watson](#), principal investigator on the project. The article has been amended.

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AnotherBee

17 November 2011 1:43PM

the UK's first geoengineering project, which aims to inject particles into the stratosphere to cool the planet,

No. The project was a pilot to test the feasibility of stratospheric particle injection.

The pilot project had no aims of planetary cooling.

It's sloppy reporting that got up a weight of steam against the pilot project.

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citizensix

17 November 2011 2:33PM

No matter what the purpose or aim, there are grave ethical questions about putting particles in the air, without any regard for the choice of those underneath to endure it or not. What do they think they're doing? Is it their planet to 'engineer'? This sounds like trying to solve problems caused by pollution with simply *more* pollution.

If reflecting the Sun's energy is the aim, why not simply employ a million teenagers to paint every roof in Britain white?

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FranklinMulberry

17 November 2011 3:41PM

The problem with this solution to Climate Change, is that it doesn't involve a large taxation system for the Government.

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Aannon

17 November 2011 4:52PM

The problem is that the Tories... uhm... sorry. Wrong news feed.

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AnotherBee

17 November 2011 5:03PM

Response to [citizensix](#), 17 November 2011 2:33PM

If reflecting the Sun's energy is the aim, why not simply employ a million teenagers to paint every roof in Britain white?

Because a thin layer of white paint is not particularly reflective.

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AnotherBee

17 November 2011 5:04PM

Response to [FranklinMulberry, 17 November 2011 3:41PM](#)

The problem with this solution to Climate Change, is that it doesn't involve a large taxation system for the Government.

If you think this sort of scheme would be funded by private enterprise, you've got a shock coming.

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Atomant77

17 November 2011 5:33PM

They will go ahead with it no matter how many oppose this experiment. Why? because there's no way that we will move away from fossil fuels since this would mean great losses for the energy companies. The environment and atmosphere are fubared no matter which way you look at it.

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FranklinMulberry

17 November 2011 5:36PM

Response to [AnotherBee, 17 November 2011 5:04PM](#)

.

The problem with this solution to Climate Change, is that it doesn't involve a large taxation system for the Government.

If you think this sort of scheme would be funded by private enterprise, you've got a shock coming.

You completely misunderstood.

I meant that the Government won't be in favor of geo-engineering solutions to climate change, because its more profitable for the government to favor carbon taxing solutions.

Carbon taxing makes money for the government.

Geo-engineering is not a tax, so it does not make money for the government.

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AnotherBee

17 November 2011 6:24PM

Response to [FranklinMulberry, 17 November 2011 5:36PM](#)

You completely misunderstood.

No I didn't!

Geo-engineering needs to be funded. To do so, governments will create a geo-engineering tax.

That may look to you like general taxation, but all taxes are taxes on economic activity, so ultimately they amount to the same thing.

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stopgeoengineering

17 November 2011 8:02PM

Damage control. "See, we aren't hiding anything." Wake up! Geoengineering has been happening globally on a massive scale since the mid-90's! What do you think chemtrails are? It's telling that this comes out the day after Infowars did it's chemtrail exposé. Just google "Global Chemtrail Secrets Revealed". No mention of the health or environmental implications in this article. No mention of the dying trees, dwindling bee population and people like me who have had to relocate because the spraying is making us ill. Geoengineering is the REAL manmade climate change!

Please see the film "What In The World Are They Spraying?" and if you don't think you are being lied to, search "Millions Spent to Confuse Public About Geoengineering" for a video of the CFR discussing how they want to keep you in the dark when it comes to geoengineering. In the words of M. Granger Morgan, head of the Department of Engineering and Public Policy at Carnegie Mellon University, "there is a lot of money getting spent to make sure that a very substantial portion of the public stays totally confused about this....literally tens of millions of dollars spent on every little thing that comes along that might, you know, relate to some uncertainty."

The people doing this are not your friends. Do your research!

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BaraLawr

17 November 2011 9:07PM

It sounds like song of an old lady who swallowed a spider a catch a fly.

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ibnhazm7

18 November 2011 11:10AM

Instead of reflecting the sun's energy why not use it and move away from fossil fuels??

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robertg22

18 November 2011 3:25PM

What a stupid idea. Climate change is natural. Warmer is better than colder. The climate change scam is getting out of hand now. If this actually worked it could over cool the planet. Then were would we be. Dumb dumb dumb.

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