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People are 'trying to find anything'; Security breaches

Megan O'Toole. **National Post**. Don Mills, Ont.: Dec 4, 2009. pg. A.8

Abstract (Summary)

"The key thing is to try to find anybody who's involved in any aspect of the IPCC and find something that you can ... take out of context," Mr. Weaver said, drawing a parallel to the case of British climate researcher Phil Jones, who was forced to step down this week after skeptics seized upon hacked emails they allege point to a plot to exaggerate the threat of climate change.

Full Text (686 words)

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An alleged series of attempted security breaches at the University of Victoria in the run-up to next week's Copenhagen summit on climate change is evidence of a larger effort to discredit climate science, says a renowned B.C. researcher.

Andrew Weaver, a University of Victoria scientist and key contributor to the Nobel prizewinning work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, says there have been a number of attempted breaches in recent months, including two successful break-ins at his campus office in which a dead computer was stolen and papers were rummaged through.

"The key thing is to try to find anybody who's involved in any aspect of the IPCC and find something that you can ... take out of context," Mr. Weaver said, drawing a parallel to the case of British climate researcher Phil Jones, who was forced to step down this week after skeptics seized upon hacked emails they allege point to a plot to exaggerate the threat of climate change.

"People don't like it, so they try to discredit it, and the way they try to discredit it is by attacking the individual responsible for it," Mr. Weaver said.

University of Victoria spokeswoman Patty Pitts said there have also been attempts to hack into climate scientists' computers, as well as incidents in which people impersonated network technicians to try to gain access to campus offices and data. However, those incidents took place at the Canadian Centre for Climate Modelling and Analysis, she said -- an Environment Canada facility located at the university. As such, Environment Canada would be the investigating agency.

"They have a completely separate computer system from ours," Ms. Pitts said.

The office break-ins took place late last year, Mr. Weaver said, while the other alleged hacking attempts at his colleagues' offices -- all unsuccessful -- took place within the past few months.

Both campus police and the Saanich Police Department helped probe the office break-ins, Ms. Pitts said, but to date, no suspects have been identified nor arrests made.

Sujata Raisinghani, a spokeswoman for Environment Canada, said while the agency has no evidence of "successful" hacking attempts at the climate modelling centre, it cannot comment on "threats against its infrastructure" for security reasons.

"Environment Canada routinely monitors its infrastructure and takes necessary precautions to protect its information assets," she said.

Mr. Weaver believes the timing of the alleged attempts to breach security is linked to the coming Copenhagen summit. In the Jones case, he blasted the media for being sucked in by the minutiae of old emails rather than trying to determine who is ultimately responsible for what he called an agenda-based campaign to discredit climate science.

"The real story in this is, who are these people and why are they doing it?" Mr. Weaver said, noting the Jones controversy was not the result of a "lucky hack" days before the Copenhagen conference. "They're trying to find anything. They don't care what it is."

He believes the campaign is driven by the fossil-fuel industry, citing "a war for public opinion."

In the Jones case, critics contend that a series of hacked emails from the computer systems of the British Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia show scientists have exaggerated the case for man-made global warming. Climate researchers deny any wrongdoing, saying the emails have been taken out of context.

Among those messages is one from Mr. Jones, which reads: "The two MMs [Canadian skeptics Steve McIntyre and Ross McKittrick] have been after the CRU station data for years. If they ever hear there is a Freedom of Information Act now in the UK, I think I'll delete the file rather than send to anyone."

In another, Kevin Trenberth, a lead IPCC author, writes: "The fact is that we can't account for the lack of warming at the moment and it is a travesty that we can't.... Our observing system is inadequate."

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Credit: Megan O'Toole; National Post