

The IPCC Process

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Summary

In 2007 the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), known as AR4, clearly stated that “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal” and it is “very likely” due to human activities. Later in 2007, the IPCC won the Nobel Peace Prize, jointly with Al Gore.

The IPCC is a body of scientists from around the world convened by the United Nations jointly under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and initiated in 1988. Its mandate is to provide policy makers with an objective assessment of the scientific and technical information available about climate change, its environmental and socio-economic impacts, and possible response options. The IPCC reports on the science of global climate and the effects of human activities on climate in particular. Major assessments were made in 1990, 1995, 2001, and 2007. Each new IPCC report reviews all the published literature over the previous 5 to 7 years, and assesses the state of knowledge, while trying to reconcile disparate claims and resolve discrepancies, and document uncertainties.

WG I deals with how the climate has changed and the possible causes. It considers how the climate system responds to various agents of change and our ability to model the processes involved as well as the performance of the whole system. It further seeks to attribute recent changes to the possible various causes, including the human influences, and thus it goes on to make projections for the future. WG II deals with impacts of climate change, vulnerability, and options for adaptation to such changes, and WG III deals with options for mitigating and slowing the climate change, including possible policy options. Each WG is made up of participants from the United Nations countries, and for the 2007 assessment there were over 450 lead authors, 800 contributing authors, and over 2,500 reviewers from over 130 countries. The IPCC process is very open. Two major reviews were carried out in producing the report, and climate “skeptics” can and do participate, some as authors. All comments were responded to in writing and by changing the report. The process is overseen by two Review Editors for each chapter. The SPM were approved line by line by governments. The rationale is that the scientists determine what can be said, but the governments help determine how it can best be said. Negotiations occur over wording to ensure accuracy, balance, clarity of message, and relevance to understanding and policy. The strength is that it is a consensus report but the process also makes it a conservative report. The next report is due in 2013.

More specifically, in WG I, there were 11 chapters and the report was 996 pages plus supplementary material online. There were 140 lead authors, hundreds of contributors, and 2 or 3 Review editors for each chapter (26). There were also over 700 reviewers. For Chapter 3, the Coordinating Lead Authors were Kevin E. Trenberth and Philip D. Jones. There were 10 other Lead Authors, and 66 Contributing Authors. The published chapter ran to 101 pp plus online supplementary material, 47 figures (126 panels), 8 Tables, and 863 references, making it the longest chapter in the report. In the expert scientific review there were 2231 comments and another 1270 comments in governmental review, for a total of 3501 comments. Every comment and the writer were entered into a huge spread sheet along with the response and actions taken in terms of changing the text.

The role of the IPCC is to provide policy relevant but not policy prescriptive scientific advice to policy makers and the general public. IPCC scientists with all kinds of value systems, ethnic backgrounds, and from different countries, gather together to produce the best consensus science possible, and with appropriate statements about confidence and uncertainty. The strength of the IPCC report is not just the solid scientific credentials but also the open process by which it is created.

The IPCC web site is <http://www.ipcc.ch> .

A listing of procedures is at: http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization_procedures.htm

All of the comments and all the associated responses on all the WG1 chapters, TS, and SPM have been available since 2007. They now reside on an official archive of historic documentation at Harvard, and remain publicly available: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/ipcc/>