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Review of IPCC workings set to open

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Amsterdam



The IPCC admits just one error, on the melting date of Himalayan glaciers
A review into the workings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is starting in Amsterdam.

The review was demanded by governments and commissioned by the UN, following allegations that the IPCC made a series of errors in its major 2007 report.

The body admits one error, concerning the melting date of Himalayan glaciers, but robustly rebuts the wider charge.

The review panel was set up by the InterAcademy Council which comprises bodies such as the UK's Royal Society.

IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri will be the first person to present to the panel when it begins on Friday, and is expected to outline the organisation's rules and procedures.

"I've read many many comments about the IPCC and I've talked to people inside and outside the organisation," said Robbert Dijkgraaf, co-chair of the InterAcademy Council.

"They feel the issue of climate change is so important that it really needs robust scientific counsel.

"The IPCC has grown in importance and it's a very good time and a good opportunity to look at its management structure and its processes," he told BBC News.

Although Friday's contributions all come from IPCC and UN personnel, Dr Dijkgraaf said the panel would be looking to draw on different shades of opinion over the next few months.

Governing concerns

The review was demanded by ministers from several governments during the February meeting

of the UN Environment Programme (Unep) governing council.



The panel's costing of natural disasters has also come in for criticism

Ministers felt allegations about IPCC errors were undermining the body's reputation and with it the reputation of its conclusions, on which many governments have based their climate policies.

Subsequently, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked the InterAcademy Council to run the review. The council is independent of the UN, and has the capacity to select from among the world's top academics.

"The attacks on the IPCC, some of which are clearly driven by people and groups that have a political agenda, have undermined some public confidence in the IPCC," admitted Bob Ward, policy and communications director of the London-based Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.

"A review by the world's premier scientific academies will help to boost confidence in the competence and integrity of the IPCC."

The IPCC has admitted making an error by including the projection that Himalayan glaciers could have disappeared by 2035, saying it regretted "the poor application of well-established IPCC procedures in this instance".

But it has stuck to its guns over other allegations, including for example that it exaggerated the likely costs of climate-related natural disasters.

It has pointed out that in a report totalling several thousand pages, compiled and collated largely by academics working in their spare time, it would be surprising if there were not one or two mistakes.

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Bob Ward, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment
Roger Pielke Jr, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Colorado who has researched the likely costs of natural disasters, remains dissatisfied with the IPCC's response, and maintains that the review must listen to critical voices if it is to be effective.

"The IPCC is certainly mendable," he said.

"In fact, it is important for it to be mended... climate change is an important issue, hence advisory bodies are similar importance.

"However, there are risks here as well, as a poorly conducted review could irreparably damage the institution."

He also said the review should look at conflicts of interest within the IPCC.

The charge has been levelled at Dr Pachauri over some of his consultancy work, although an investigation in March by auditors KPMG cleared him of financial irregularities.

"Dr Pachauri is in a very difficult position, because some of the most vociferous critics of the IPCC hold him personally responsible for the panel's perceived failings," said Mr Ward.

"Such critics are unlikely to be satisfied by anything other than Dr Pachauri's departure."

However, Dr Dijkgraaf suggested Dr Pachauri's position was not an issue for the review, and pointed out that the IPCC had itself asked for an independent review.

Wide view

The 12-strong review panel spans the physical and biological sciences and economics, and is drawn from the developed and developing worlds.

It is chaired by US economist Harold Shapiro, a former advisor to the administrations of Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton.

Its most decorated member is Mario Molina, who shared the 1995 Nobel Prize for Chemistry for his work on ozone depletion.

About half have worked in environment-related science or economics, but the others have not, meaning they can bring in perspectives and practices from unrelated fields.

The panel is charged with producing conclusions by the end of August, which will then go out for peer review.

Its final recommendations will be presented to the IPCC in October, during a meeting aimed at finalising structures and procedures for its next major evaluation of climate science and economics, due to conclude in 2013.

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