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McKittrick tries and fails to move the goalposts on climate action

In a June 16 Financial Post [op-ed](#) (“The Global Warming Hiatus?”), Ross McKittrick continues to try to move the goalposts for climate action, while harping on the tired old “warming pause” meme. It’s been thoroughly established that short-term variation is not significant in the context of more than a century of warming. It’s also been clearly shown that it makes no sense to view warming solely in terms of surface temperatures, when heat is being stored in the ocean. McKittrick attempts to promote the “pause” while dodging these troublesome facts by asserting that validating climate model projections are what’s really important. In line with the new mantra of the delayers, he suggests we should just wait and see what happens.

In fact, global climate models work well for the purpose they were designed for: evaluating temperatures over long timescales. We already have all the information we need to know that action now is the cheapest and most effective way to avert dangerous climate change.

Climate models are designed to work over the long term. And over the long term, scientists [stand by the models’ projections](#). Short-term variations can be introduced because the models cannot predict the timing of significant climate factors like El Niño events or volcanic eruptions, although they can correctly model those events if the timing is established. The latest IPCC report concluded that short-term discrepancies did not invalidate models’ usefulness for establishing ranges of future impacts. Others have even found that [observed temperature increases may be underreported](#), greatly reducing the significance of any recent discrepancy.

Climate models project a range of possible temperatures, not one precise temperature. The recent variations in global average temperature remain within the expected range of possible conditions. But a reader wouldn’t know this from viewing the misleading graph accompanying McKittrick’s op-ed. Instead of a range, his graph presents the average path from an ensemble of model results, misleadingly giving the impression that model results can be used to simulate and project year-by-year variations. McKittrick even claims “the black line can be described as the mainstream thinking of contemporary climate science,” a preposterous statement given that [official IPCC graphics](#) often present the projected shift in the range that is expected without even including a central trend line.

We have plenty of information now, enough to know we should take action. McKittrick states that there is a “high probability” of information emerging in the next few years that strongly affects long-term climate projections. He doesn’t state what his confident prediction is based on, and it’s difficult to imagine what it might be. Climate science is improving incrementally, but the basics have been established for a hundred years and aren’t likely to suddenly change. Emissions are causing warming. Too much warming

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and we're in trouble. Any real game-changing discoveries are much more likely to [alter projections for the worse](#), a fact that the IPCC has acknowledged.

Action is cheap and practical. The IPCC has identified many “low hanging fruits” of climate mitigation, especially through energy efficiency and the rapidly plummeting price of renewable energy technologies. Much of the needed investment could come simply from shifting resources over from fossil fuels, rather than committing additional resources.

Inaction is costly. McKittrick flat-out states that “there is no downside to awaiting this information” while waiting for “crucial facts” could prevent countries from making unspecified “costly mistakes.” This is just wrong: the IPCC, U.S. National Climate Assessment, and many other exhaustive reports have confirmed that waiting only increases the cost of eventual mitigation, as well as committing us to costly climate impacts. The potential costs of modernizing our energy system (which we would need to do anyway and which [carries many co-benefits](#)) pale in comparison to the costs we would face in an unchecked warming scenario.

McKittrick is attempting to appear prudent with his “wait and see” mantra, but his approach fails the test of both science and common sense. His background also doesn't lend him credibility – he has been [openly adversarial to climate science](#) for decades, and is associated with anti-science groups including the now-discredited Competitive Enterprise Institute, Heartland Institute, and Marshall Institute. These groups have opposed scientific research on all fronts, including disputing the connection between cigarettes and cancer. He's far from a neutral observer and his arguments just don't hold up.