Matt Ridley Unleashes Slew of Climate Delayer Talking Points in the WSJ

In his latest Wall Street Journal op-ed, Matt Ridley provides a predictable litany of reasons why action on climate change shouldn’t be a priority right now. It’s a classic “delayer” mash-up of professing respect for science while simultaneously failing to take repeated warnings from scientists seriously. None of his distractions or excuses change the fact that acting on global warming now is the cheapest, safest, and most effective way to ensure a livable future climate for humans.

- World leaders are taking climate change seriously.
- Warming hasn’t stopped, and in fact the world is on track to get 4ºC warmer by the end of the century.
- Scientists are making great strides in understanding the factors driving short-term climate variations.
- Climate action doesn’t have to wait until other problems are solved.

World leaders are taking climate change seriously, even those leaders that aren’t attending the summit.
Ridley calls out China, Germany, and India, without mentioning the fact that Germany is on track to meet one of the world’s most aggressive renewable energy targets, and currently uses nearly 30% renewable energy thanks to their groundbreaking (and wildly popular) transformation of their power generation system. Meanwhile, China is laying the groundwork for its own emissions trading program, with pilot programs already underway in major cities. It invested $56 billion in 2013 in switching to renewable energy and modernizing its infrastructure. Meanwhile, thanks to government stimulus programs, renewable energy is bringing electricity to some of the poorest slums of India. Their actions at home speak far more loudly than Ridley’s rhetorical questioning over their dedication.

The world is on track to get a lot warmer by the end of the century -- not just “a bit.”
It’s unclear just how much warming Ridley means by “a bit,” but the IPCC projects a warming of around 4ºC on a business-as-usual emissions pathway. The IPCC further clarifies that this would exceed the limits of agricultural adaptation in many parts of the world, even causing tropical regions to become seasonally uninhabitable. The World Bank has further studied what a 4ºC warmer world would be like, tallying overwhelming human and economic costs.

The “warming pause” is a piece of statistical sleight of hand.
Newer studies than the one Ridley references show that pauses of 15 years are indeed consistent with the most sophisticated generation of climate models, and do not invalidate the existence of a long term trend. Ross McKitrick’s “new statistical calculation” doesn’t change that fact, and has already been roundly debunked (including yesterday in this very blog). Each of the past three complete decades has been the warmest on record at the time, and 13 out of the 14 warmest years on record have
occurred since 2000. And that’s just surface warming: Global warming, as measured by the total heat content of the earth, atmosphere, and oceans, continues even though heat may fluctuate between them.

Of particular note on this point is Ridley’s misrepresentation of Chen and Tung’s research on heat exchange with the ocean. The IPCC Fifth Assessment Report reached a best estimate that all warming since 1951 was caused by human activity, and that natural factors exerted a net cooling influence. Ridley implies that Chen and Tung have disproven this fact, but their research concerns the internal exchange of heat over shorter time periods, and doesn’t affect the overall conclusion.

**Ongoing scientific research amounts to more than just “excuses.”** Ridley offers up the existence of “40 different excuses” for fluctuations in the surface warming rate, as if scientists are constantly struggling to make up new ones. He doesn’t say how he’s counting those factors, but even giving him the benefit of the doubt, the global climate is complicated enough that 40 is a reasonable number of contributors to any given climate variation. Factors like solar cycles, aerosols, and ocean dynamics aren’t mutually exclusive. It would be more accurate to say that scientists are working on understanding the relative contribution from different factors, but Ridley seems more focused on trying to make scientists appear ineffectual.

**Solving world problems doesn’t need to be done one at a time.** The argument that other humanitarian problems are more pressing than climate change is increasingly common among climate “delayers,” as their scientific credibility wears thinner and thinner. It would be a much more convincing tactic if any of them ever seemed to advocate action on those problems as loudly as they championed inaction on climate. The reality is that climate change worsens problems like poverty, hunger, and conflict, and existing research shows that the best way to deal with it is to start now.