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Climate Scientist Steps Down

British Researcher Leaves Post Temporarily Amid Probe Sparked by Hacked Emails

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The British scientist at the heart of a scandal over climate-change research temporarily stepped down Tuesday as director of a prominent research group amid an internal probe that follows the release of hacked emails involving him and other scientists.

The University of East Anglia in the U.K. said Phil Jones, head of the university's Climatic Research Unit, had decided to step aside from the director's post.

The announcement comes less than a week before world leaders are set to meet for a climate summit in Copenhagen. The two-week conference, sponsored by the United Nations, is supposed to come up with tougher policies to curb greenhouse-gas emissions and slow global warming.

The need for such action has been buttressed in large part by research by Dr. Jones and his colleagues in East Anglia and around the world. But hackers recently stole emails and documents from the East Anglia center that suggested Dr. Jones and other like-minded scientists tried to squelch the views of dissenting researchers and advocated manipulating data.

The fallout from the hacked emails is spreading beyond the U.K. Also Tuesday, Penn State University confirmed that Michael Mann -- a climate scientist on its faculty who figures prominently in the emails -- is under "inquiry" by the university.

Dr. Mann's work reconstructing historic global temperatures has, over the past decade, become a focal point of debate. Penn State said in a statement that its inquiry, which stems from disclosed emails written by Dr. Mann, is a preliminary step to determine whether a full investigation is needed. He didn't respond to requests for comment.

On Wednesday, President Barack Obama's top science adviser -- John Holdren, a climate scientist who sent one email among those hacked and posted -- is due to testify on Capitol Hill. The House committee holding the hearing has billed it as a way to explore "the urgent, consensus view...that global warming is real, and the science indicates that it is getting worse." Dr. Holdren's office declined to comment. Dr. Holdren has long spoken of the "overwhelming" evidence of man-made global warming.

The emails have led to calls for probes into the state of climate science from U.S. politicians skeptical that humans are causing global warming. They have also drawn criticism from some high-profile environmentalists.

In one email, Dr. Jones suggested to Dr. Mann that they should try to keep out of scientific journals the research of scientists who challenge the idea of man-made global warming. We "will keep them out somehow -- even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!" the email says.

The East Anglia institute that Dr. Jones headed has become a key player in building evidence for the U.N.'s argument that humans are behind global warming. In statements released by the institute in recent days, Dr. Jones has defended the integrity of the institute's scientific work, while saying that he and his colleagues "accept that some of the published emails do not read well."

On Tuesday, Dr. Jones said the East Anglia institute couldn't continue to do its work with him as its director amid the controversy. "What is most important is that CRU continues its world leading research with as little interruption and diversion as possible," he said in the statement. "After a good deal of consideration," he wrote, he decided to step down from the director's job pending the investigation.

Longtime critics of the premise that humans are responsible for climate change cheered word of the move by Dr. Jones and the inquiry into Dr. Mann. "I think we're making headway," said Oklahoma's James Inhofe, the senior Republican on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

On Tuesday, Mr. Inhofe sent a letter to the chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Barbara Boxer (D., Calif.), that called for hearings on whether any U.S. laws were broken by the scientists, or "any taxpayer-funded research deliberately obscured or manipulated." A spokesman for Ms. Boxer didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

—Stephen Power contributed to this article.

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