

Ross McKittrick  
Dept of Economics  
University of Guelph

Calgary Herald, April 22, 2002.  
Copyright © Calgary Herald

### **Kyoto won't stop the droughts.**

In the spring of 1880 my grandfather's grandfather, William McKittrick, brought his wife Catherine and three children from southwestern Ontario to a 320 acre homestead in southern Manitoba. Along the way they crossed a soggy land on narrow wagon tracks while coping with fever and measles in the kids. Upon arrival their house was a shanty built with boards from the wagon. That summer they lived on wild game and the food they had brought with them. They seeded a crop in a patch plowed for them by a nearby settler while they were en route.

The summer was lovely but short. Many of their crops were frozen by hard early frosts. That winter the blizzards blew for three days at a stretch, and temperatures reportedly fell to 70 below zero. This was new, and terrifying, to a family raised in Ontario.

But prairie farming has never been for the faint-hearted. Many didn't stay; William and Catherine did. That farm is still there, and still operated by McKittricks. Not by me, however. The line from which I come left farming one generation later.

But I think about that winter of 1880, and how they could not possibly have anticipated what the climate had in store for them. All over the northern hemisphere the years from 1880 to 1930 saw rapidly rising temperatures and dramatic changes in patterns of precipitation, culminating in the dustbowl of the dirty Thirties.

Of course nobody blamed it on humans. They knew how fickle nature can be. And anyway for the four decades afterwards the world got colder again. By the 1970s the public was being roused to a new alarm: the coming ice age. It is instructive to read magazine articles and scientific books from that time. One hears a confident tone of doom coupled with overbearing scientific certainty: although the climate is a complex thing, we are quite certain that a new ice age has begun and we must do something at once.

Of course it was far from clear what one could do about an ice age. And when the glaciers did not arrive on schedule the whole thing was forgotten. But now a new climate alarmism—global warming—has arisen, backed by that same voice of doom and confident claims of scientific certainty. This time, the public is being asked to support a "do

something" package called the Kyoto Protocol. While the Chretien government remains vague about specific policies, the treaty is, at heart, a plan to ration energy use in the western world.

Fever pitches lead to bad policy decisions. I have been studying this issue for almost ten years, and have given up hoping that the feds will offer a logical argument for Kyoto. Scientists have pointed out since day one that it will neither stop nor measurably slow down global warming, should it take place. And the evidence that humans are causing global warming relies on computer model simulations. These same models are incapable of correctly reproducing the past behaviour of the climate. They cannot account for the fact that NASA weather satellites have detected no atmospheric warming for the past 22 years. And they do not agree about the future behaviour of the climate.

In my field of economics, the inability of computer models to reproduce the past, explain the present or produce coherent projections of the future would disqualify them for long-range forecasting. And since this pretty much disqualifies all economic models, we stopped making long-range forecasts decades ago. That will happen to climatology too, but it may take a generation. Until then, we are not obliged to treat their forecasts as gospel truth.

Last year the federal government said Kyoto would open up vast new business opportunities. In January they changed tune and said it might cost half a billion dollars a year. Now they say it's more like ten billion.

They're getting warmer. They're also getting more manipulative. The argument now is: yes it will be costly, but the alternative is having more droughts on the prairies. Long ago, the prophet Elijah warned Israel's king Ahab that the rains would not return until the people give up idolatry. Today the Environment Minister roams the land prophesying drought and famine unless we give up our cars and home-heating and coal-based industries.

Droughts are awful. They are not the only perils farmers face: floods, early frosts and low selling prices can be worse. But droughts are truly awful, and since one is now underway it provides a convenient emotional hook when trying to sell a policy you can't otherwise defend.

Experts at the University of Regina Prairie Drought Project have put a lot of effort into trying to understand the past hydrology of places like southern Saskatchewan and Alberta. Unfortunately the story is not encouraging.

People think of the dustbowl as the worst drought ever. If only that were so. Twentieth century droughts were bad, but those in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century were worse. And those in the decades from 1680 to 1720 worse yet. In fact, despite the recent dry years, Humboldt Lake in Saskatchewan has a higher water level today than for most of the past 2000 years.

Analysis of sediment levels at the bottom of Chauvin Lake in Alberta shows that the recent droughts are among the mildest since the 1500s, and the trend over the past 2000 years is towards fewer rather than more droughts.

Statistical analysis has shown that there is a 20 percent probability of a major drought around Chauvin Lake at least once every decade. And there is an almost 50 percent probability of a major drought at least once every 30 years.

What about global warming? The authors of the study I am referring to find that the worst-case scenarios only increase the probability of a drought by 1 percent over 30 years. The natural variability is so wide, the effect is statistically undetectable.

Even if it were detectable, Kyoto would not change it. Even people who believe humans influence global warming have stated from the beginning that if it is going to happen, Kyoto will have no impact on the process. If I seem to be repeating myself it is because the point is central to the question of whether Kyoto is worth doing, and the feds have not been forthcoming about it.

The government knows all this. They paid for all this research. They have staffs of people who read it and brief cabinet ministers on it. They know, or they ought to know, that telling westerners Kyoto would reduce the threat of prairie droughts is false. To say we should support Kyoto "because of the drought" is about as ethical as promising Newfoundlanders that if they support this treaty the cod will come back. It exploits the hardship of prairie farmers and the sympathies of Canadians to create an emotional appeal for a policy that the federal government is too embarrassed to admit was a mistake. The whole exercise is shameful.

If only there was an easy way to prevent droughts. There isn't. Nature has decreed that farmers in Alberta and Saskatchewan face the risk of a major drought every decade. If Kyoto is implemented there will be just as many droughts as before, but energy costs will be higher and government revenues will be lower, making it harder for farmers and everyone else to deal with the situation.

If the federal cabinet has a real argument to make on behalf of Kyoto, let's hear it. But cut the manipulative nonsense that this will alleviate the current drought or prevent the next one.