

Discussion paper:
**Geo-Engineering the Climate:
An Emerging Technology Assessment**

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Introduction

Each workshop, op-ed, white-paper and article on geo-engineering fixes to the global warming problem builds toward the necessary, and inevitable, technology assessment, what could be the most important technology assessment in human history. What will be involved in such a technology assessment? One early step should be to look back at previous assessments, a wide range of which were conducted, for example, by the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment during its 23 years of operation up to 1995 (some 750 separate assessments!) available at: http://www.princeton.edu/~ota/ns20/pubs_f.html. Other major assessments were conducted for the super-sonic transport, nuclear power, and hazardous wastes. Typical TAs include a look at: feasibility, cost/benefit, risks, social and environmental impacts (positive and negative), institutional frameworks, ethical dimensions, and alternatives. Less typically, TAs take up the more nuanced issues of opportunity costs and interactions with other options, and factors that tend to narrow the range of choice. More often, though, such searching question arise only after implementation of critical technologies.

The challenge in many TAs is that the technology under review is often novel and unique, a break from the past and, thus, uncharted techno-social territory. This mostly holds true for climate geo-engineering. But it is also true that humans have attempted to change the weather and the climate for most of human history. Thus one way to cast some light on geo-engineering to mitigate global warming is to look back at purposeful efforts to modify at least local and regional weather and climate. The analog is useful on three counts: (1) past weather and climate modification efforts raised concerns similar to those about geo-engineering, so it injects evidence into the current discussion, which is heavy on speculation; (2) some of the emerging geo-engineering schemes aimed at global warming (e.g., enhancing oceanic clouds) are versions of more conventional weather modification techniques; and (3) we are likely increasingly to employ orthodox weather and climate modification in response to global warming, so a look back serves even if geo-engineering does not materialize.

This paper focuses on lessons from the social science of weather modification.

¹ Disclosure: I have participated in cloud seeding experiments, conducted fieldwork to assess the effects of cloud seeding in South Florida, including gathering seeded rainwater for chemical analysis to assess whether silver was acting as a pollutant, and, as a panelist on the 1991 National Academy of Sciences study, *Policy Implications of Greenhouse Warming*, I took part in discussions of geo-engineering (all under my previous name, William E. Riebsame). My attitude is openness to such technological options, in case they can be shown to be effective, but my work stresses human adaptation to the environment, especially to climate change, see: <http://spot.colorado.edu/~wtravis/>

Past Efforts at Weather and Climate Modification

As early as 1966, Sewell and Kates framed weather modification as “big science” and argued that: “For ‘big science’, external criteria are required and the suggested ones are based on considerations of technological merit, scientific merit, and social merit, and are designed to answer the question, why pursue this particular science?” (Sewell and Kates, 1966, p. 351). They were suggesting, in essence, a weather modification technology assessment, which never got done. Now we are asking this question of climate geo-engineering schemes.

Serious efforts have been made in the past century to change the climate of whole regions (the shelter-belt program on the U.S. Great Plain; snow-pack augmentation in the Southwest), and to routinely alter the meteorology of snow, rain, fog and hail at least locally; we even attempted to modify hurricanes. Weather and climate modification is currently practiced at local to regional scales around the world (Garstang et al., 2005), and will surely be ramped up if global warming is perceived as worsening weather- and climate-related problems (e.g., concerns about water supplies in the American Southwest have already evoked increased cloud seeding).

Modern weather and climate modification arose in the last half century based on growing understanding of atmospheric processes; yet it has a checkered scientific history (Committee on the Status and Future Directions in U.S Weather Modification Research and Operations, 2003). Precipitation enhancement has long been the focus, but atmospheric engineering schemes have gone well beyond rainmaking. The Soviet Union in particular advanced large-scale efforts to reduce hail, tornadoes, and drought (Cotton and Pielke, Sr., 1995), as well as a scheme to divert Arctic Slope freshwater runoff, thus increasing the salinity and decreasing the ice cover of the Arctic Ocean (Kellogg and Schneider, 1974), a plan eerily similar to mechanisms that some scientists now fear could affect the thermohaline circulation. The United States embarked on an effort to reduce hurricane intensity (Dorst, 2007), and several large-scale modification projects (most still in practice) sought to regularly increase snow-pack in the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada, and rainfall in, for example, Texas, Florida and Dakotas (Garstang, et al. 2005). Some of these efforts, by virtue of their long-term implementation, have ostensibly changed the climate of those places---some stream basins in the Sierra Nevada have been seeded almost every winter for 50 years!

Contemporary weather modification programs rest on a mixture of slender, but encouraging, scientific substantiation and skeptical analysis (Committee on the Status and Future Directions in U.S Weather Modification Research and Operations, 2003) as well as sincere, but also wishful, thinking. The goal here is not to evaluate cloud seeding technology *per se*, but to assess the social response, decision-making, and other implications for geo-engineering.

Social Response to Weather and Climate Modification

A small but useful body of analysis exists on social response to conventional weather and climate modification schemes, coming especially from sociologists, policy scientists, and geographers (e.g., Steinberg, 2000; Farhar, 1977; Farhar and Mewes, 1975; Sewell, 1966). Fleming’s (2007) dismissive *Wilson Quarterly* piece casts past weather and climate modifiers as arrogant “Titans“ with no regard for social or environmental consequences. Discussing a 1965 proposal to increase the Earth’s albedo with bright particles spread across the tropical oceans (among the first serious global warming geo-engineering scheme), Fleming claims that “No one thought to consider the side effects of particles washing up on tropical beaches or choking marine life, or the negative consequences of redirecting hurricanes, much less other effects beyond our imagination. And no one thought to ask if the local inhabitants would be in favor of such schemes.” (p. 58). This is simply not true of many weather and climate modification programs (including hurricane modification, which, I will argue below, was suspended largely

due to social concerns), and my sense is that the recent writing about geo-engineering, even by proponents, is actually weighted to concerns about unintended social and ecological consequences.

I first ran into a sociologist asking people what they thought of cloud seeding in 1971 while I was a student employee on NOAA's Florida Area Cumulus Experiment (FACE; see: Woodley et al., 1977). Admittedly the project meteorologists did not think much of his efforts, believing that simply asking people about the project would bias them against it, but the results (also for Colorado and South Dakota projects) showed strong support for cloud seeding (Haas, 1973). Ironically, when he (and I) asked sugarcane farmers in the seeding target area what they thought, some said that they, themselves, already partly controlled the rain by flooding their fields; they were little bothered by the fed's cloud seeding.

So, there is indeed a history of asking whether "the local inhabitants would be in favor of such schemes", despite Fleming's argument. The most well-developed assessment was conducted in the 1970s for hail suppression (Changnon et al., 1978). Extensive surveys and other social analyses found that a majority of the public, especially farmers, believed that the technology could work and that its benefits would outweigh the costs. But the hail studies also asked urbanites what they thought, and explored how cities might deal with extra rainfall (more car accidents). Fears about "unintended consequences" and "over-correction" seem to have been relatively mild, though they were expressed. Because the High Plains of the Dakotas and Black Hills had been a favorite testing ground, the 1972 Rapid City flash flood, which occurred amidst a Bureau of Reclamation seeding program, certainly tested social acceptance. Steinberg's (2000) study of the flood's connection (real or imagined) to seeding, based on hearings and reviews by the Bureau of Reclamation, found that if a flood happens to occur in an area undergoing cloud seeding to increase rainfall (even if the events are not on the same day or in the seeded area), then alarms will be raised by at least some proportion of the affected population, especially those at risk and those who feel that humans should not try to change nature or interfere in "God's will" (Steinberg, 2000). But Farhar² (1976), based on surveys of residents, found that the perceived link between cloud seeding and the flash flood had only a small effect on support for cloud seeding in the area, which was strong before and after the flood. Indeed, the dominant concern that developed in the hail project area, based partly in the science and partly on perceptions, was that regular hail suppression would decrease rainfall (i.e., create permanent drought), a sensible worry based in the causal-chain that cloud seeders themselves presented (Farhar, 1975; 1977).

Some 15-20 seeding projects have been operated in and around the Colorado River Basin for over 20 years, and plans are underway for a coordinated project to run for the next quarter century (Peterson, 2007). The core project, winter seeding in the San Juan mountains of SW Colorado (Project Skywater) elicited a series of impact studies and hearings at its beginning in 1971 under the Bureau of Reclamation, where some concerns were raised about flooding and avalanche, but has run with little overt opposition since with a hodgepodge of local, federal and private funding. Cloud seeding in Texas is so popular that local tax districts pay for it. Overall, cloud seeding seems to evoke little negative response, and everyone from farmers, to skiers, to water managers evince at least the hope that it can help. No implacable opposition to precipitation enhancement has emerged.

² Farhar, as far as I can tell, has more experience studying public acceptance of purposeful weather and climate modification than any other social scientist, and almost all this work was conducted before c.1980. She has retired to Boulder, CO, and has made her extensive weather modification files available for further research.

But maybe rain and snow augmentation is too tame; perhaps modifying hurricanes is a better analog for climate geo-engineering. Beginning in the 1960s the U.S. experimented with hurricane seeding to reduce storm intensity (Simpson and Simpson, 1966). The social response to Project Stormfury (Dorst, 2007) is poorly recorded (and deserves more digging), but both lay and professional fears were raised, and I believe it fair to conclude that this potentially useful technology was indeed stymied, even in the experimental stage, by social and political concerns. Worries included: that hurricanes might intensify and/or change course; that more rainfall would cause worse flooding (a fear founded in the Stormfury's physical logic); and even that tempering hurricanes would affect hemispheric climate by interfering with the poleward transfer of tropical energy. The scientists involved tip-toed around such concerns and preferred to keep a low profile (this was before NEPA, EIS's, and public input), but I heard personally from some of the principals that public concerns, media hype, and bureaucratic fears kept the project from achieving its experimental goals (I worked as a student employee for Joanne Simpson in 1971-73 when, frustrated by lack of access to hurricanes, she had turned to seeding individual clouds over Florida as an analog; some of this frustration peeks through in the Dorst, 2007, history of Stormfury, and in biographies of those involved, see, for example: <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/Simpson/simpson.php>).

In "The Decision to Seed Hurricanes", a classic early quantitative risk analysis still used in risk assessment classes today, Howard et al. (1972) raised concerns about "responsibility costs," the notion that once the government seeds a hurricane, it then "owns" the damage done by that storm, at least the damage above some nominal level that would have occurred naturally, a level notoriously difficult to assess. They even suggested that given the large value of hurricane losses (even then, before we had multi-billion dollar storms), that the responsibility costs might be so large as to preclude ever seeding a storm. They concluded that perhaps only emergency seeding in the face of catastrophic storms would over-ride this threshold. [The current draft AMS policy statement on geo-engineering picks up on this theme: "Geoengineering could conceivably offer targeted and fast-acting options to reduce acute climate impacts and provide strategies of last resort if abrupt, catastrophic, or otherwise unacceptable climate change impacts become unavoidable by other means."]

Cautionary rules developed for when hurricanes could be seeded (derived from precisely the kind of public feedback and concern for unintended consequences that Fleming claims has been ignored) so constrained the experimental area that opportunities to seed storms failed to materialize. Efforts to shift the program to the more active Pacific were thwarted by logistics and the expressed concerns of Pacific Rim countries, a foreshadowing perhaps of the geo-politics of geo-engineering. Ultimately, Stormfury seeded only four storms in 21 years, a run that sapped its enthusiasm, and, finally, its funding in 1983 (Dorst, 2007). There's little doubt that concerns about the unintended consequences of hurricane seeding were one factor in the project's failure. But Stormfury offers another cautionary tale for geo-engineering. The research associated with it, including much better hurricane monitoring, revealed the episodic intensity changes (especially eye-wall replacement cycles) that to this day still dog hurricane forecasting. The more they learned, the more that Stormfury researchers realized how hard it would be to demonstrate an effect (Willoughby et al., 1985). By the same token they realized that they could not constrain their potential responsibility in a seeded hurricane disaster.

So the history of weather modification offers a mixed message. Routine cloud seeding for more rain and snow is widely accepted, even desired, and practiced with little regard to liabilities or demonstrated effectiveness year after year in the U.S. and around the world. Yet the arguably more vital, but spookier, effort to modify hurricanes ran aground on fears of unintended consequences, political sensitivities, and the *a priori* indeterminacy of its effectiveness.

In many ways the literature suggests that public perception of weather and climate modification leans toward the positive and credulous, perhaps even toward an outsized sense of control over nature, a willingness to accept poorly-supported claims of effectiveness, and a belief that we can change atmospheric systems quite dramatically, for better or worse (e.g., Stormfury). And almost without exception a very positive benefit/cost ratio adheres to, and furthers, cloud seeding: application is relatively cheap compared to the benefits even of an effect (signal) that resides within, or just barely rises above, the noise of weather variability. This applies to everything from snow pack augmentation to hurricane seeding (Sorkin, 1982, p. 95); even a small reduction in wind speed in a hurricane destined to cause billions of dollars of damage would pay off handsomely. Current estimates of additional water in the Colorado River yield benefit/cost ratios of 4-1 to 60-1. Finally, cloud seeding is palliative. Cotton (2008), a cloud seeding veteran, finds that weather modification appeals to politicians wishing to “do something” when local economies are threatened by weather problems, and the field’s history is full of applied efforts called for by political and business leaders, despite lack of evidence for effectiveness.

Implications for Geo-Engineering

A similar economic calculus will make CxGE appealing; if effective it almost certainly would present huge benefits over costs. Cost-effectiveness calculations conducted in 1991 for the National Academy of Sciences study, *Policy Implications of Greenhouse Warming* (Panel on the Policy Implications of Greenhouse Warming, 1992), though rough (p. 486) seem in line with recent estimates. The wide range of weather modification projects already in practice suggests that the potential exists for field trials based on conventional weather modification techniques. But the Project Stormfury experience does suggest bigger hurdles for bigger projects, and my hunch is that large-scale geo-engineering will run afoul of the same frustration: field tests are so constrained that they become infeasible.

Nevertheless, realized global warming is likely to elicit more conventional local and regional weather modification, including especially precipitation enhancement and hurricane modification (Department of Homeland Security, 2008), so a CxGE technology assessment must at least address traditional weather modification writ larger. It also works out that, despite much attention to novel schemes like stratospheric aerosol injection, many anti-global warming schemes are based on more conventional weather modification techniques, including seeding to change the albedo of naturally-extensive cloud systems like oceanic strato-cumulus or high level cirrus (ships already enhance oceanic clouds from their stack effluent and jets make cirrus clouds via contrails) (Cotton, 2008; Latham et al., 2008). Given a spectrum of options, including those already in the arsenal of weather modification, we can call on actual experience to illuminate at least the initial phases of CxGE. Cloud seeding is currently conducted on a routine basis in many places in the U.S. and around the world, without discernible negative effects or significant social opposition (Cotton and Pielke, 1995; Garstang et al., 2005). So geo-engineering schemes that emulate past weather modification seem more likely to advance to field trials than others.

Geo-engineering Cons and Pros

Robock (2008) lays out “20 reasons why geo-engineering may be a bad idea.” He includes evident negatives like unintended consequences and the potential dampened enthusiasm for mitigation (a moral hazard: less enthusiasm for preventing global warming). But he also offers concerns that, so far, have been less discussed, like weaponization, accidents, and the potential for over-correction, issues also raised about cloud seeding. And certainly a cautious attitude already flavors the nascent technology assessment: CxGE schemes are viewed as dangerous unless proven otherwise, a version of the precautionary principle that will surely make

it difficult for any scheme to pass muster. But there are reasons why CxGE might be a good idea, and reasons why, in the coming technology assessment, we should pay attention to the possibility of rejecting an effective and benign scheme, should one appear on the list. While not rejecting Robock's twenty negatives, I offer five positives:

1. Any serious CxGE proposal will first have to pass muster for effectiveness and lack of negative impacts through rigorous modeling simulation. The necessary modeling "bake off" will surely bring more effort and resources to bear on weather and climate modeling, an effort needed for the whole global change problem.
2. Careful laboratory and field testing of CxGE efforts will provide more empirical insights into how earth systems work, insight that cannot be gained via modeling or paleo-studies alone. These insights will be just where we need them: in cloud processes, radiative effects and feedbacks.
3. The CxGE technology assessment, which I believe will be made compulsory by the global community, will further our understanding of the human dimensions of earth systems.
4. CxGE efforts, if shown effective, may be able to reduce the near-term effects of climate change, to shave off at least some magnitude of losses and impacts, providing time for mitigation and adaptation. In this way CxGE appears as a back-stop to human development in a dangerous time, not unlike the many other levers humans have deployed to manage natural resources.
5. CxGE may be needed if global warming is worse, and/or occurs faster and in more abrupt manner, than currently projected. In this way CxGE schemes act more like insurance than as an excuse to weaken mitigation efforts.

The last is perhaps the most compelling argument, but also worrisome, as another literature, that on social response to natural hazards, indicates that not only do we indeed lean toward technological fixes (e.g., levees rather than land use change), but that these fixes create enduring path dependencies that constrain future options. Certainly geo-engineering falls into this class of response.

A Slippery Slope?

Some discussions of CxGE suggest that even thinking about this particular cure might be worse than the disease, that serious attention to geo-engineering solutions could exacerbate the problem by reducing our commitment to mitigation, and that even analyzing engineering solutions puts us on a slippery slope to relying on them instead of mitigation (e.g., Kiehl, 2006; Fleming, 2008; Robock, 2008). In this vein, the thinking goes, serious attention to climate-cooling schemes might invoke a paradox that natural hazards researchers call the "levee effect" (i.e., that dams and levees encourage flood zone development, thus exacerbating future losses when inevitable failures occur) and the related "moral hazard" associated with insurance behavior.

The moral hazard argument is difficult to refute, at least partly because its proponents have not demonstrated its real-world effects in analog cases. I think we lack evidence-based argument here. Insurance programs seem more affected by adverse selection than by moral hazard, and the question of whether disaster relief encourages risky behavior has not been settled after years of debate among hazards researchers, suggesting to me that the effect is not very strong. Mileti (1999) concludes that expectations of relief do not necessarily encourage hazard

zone occupancy, but insurance might. The leading scholar of hazards insurance, Howard Kunreuther, who has argued that well-designed insurance systems lessen the potential for moral hazard, concluded after Hurricane Katrina that expectations of government aid do indeed reduce adoption of both pre-hazard mitigation and of insurance (Kunreuther, 2006). Of course, insurance companies have a hook to enforce mitigation (e.g., increased premiums for risky behavior, and discounts for risk reduction behavior) and relief rarely compensates for all losses, so the logical homeowner, for instance, does not use either as an excuse to ignore risks. Perhaps outrage that our energy use has us shooting thousands of artillery rounds into the stratosphere and/or whitening the sky with aerosols or artificial clouds would actually intensify the sense of urgency for mitigation.

A similar argument was raised against research on adaptation to climate change, which could also be seen as dampening efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. [This argument was made to me personally by prominent climatologists at the Toronto conference on The Changing Atmosphere in 1988 and at the Second World Climate Conference in Geneva in 1992, where I presented a paper on adapting to global warming.] I believe we have usefully gotten past this argument.

On the other hand, there is some evidence for the “levee effect” whereby levees and dams invite development that then incurs even greater losses when they fail (not just that they invite development, that’s what they are designed to do, but that they in some cases increase losses, a moral hazard) (Kates et al., 2006). The levee effect is not quite analogous to a moral hazard, but it may inform our thinking about geo-engineering. For example, maybe the problem is not so much that its prospect squelches mitigation, but dampens adaptive efforts.

Liability?

Liability and “robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul” arguments are common in weather modification discourse, but actual cases simply have not materialized during decades of active cloud seeding. I believe the field has managed to stay in business partly because cloud seeders get to claim a beneficial effect that is small enough not to cause problems. Barely a dozen court cases since 1950 have yielded no findings of liability, nor tort precedence (Standler, 2002, 2006). Howard et al. (1972) raised the possibility of “responsibility costs” in hurricane seeding, and even suggested they may be so large as to shut down any seeding program. But right now there is only null experience in weather and climate modification liability.

Governance?

Professional best-practices and standards exist for weather and climate modification, along with a professional society (the Weather Modification Association) and WMO and American Meteorological Society (AMS) policy statements on weather modification and guidelines for projects (<http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/arep/wmp/STATEMENTS/statwme.pdf>) and <http://www.ametsoc.org/policy/wxmod.html>).

Only very weak regulation and government oversight has emerged in any of the cloud seeding projects around the world. Several U.S. states have passed weak weather modification laws; some repealed them, or left them un-enforced (Standler, 2002, 2006). The UN general assembly passed in 1977 a resolution proscribing environmental modification as an act of aggression, weaponization, or purposeful harm to another national state. The AMS policy statement on weather modification addresses mostly scientific issues, and only lightly suggests attention to liability, compensation, and environmental effects. The current draft AMS policy statement in geo-engineering calls for: “Development and analysis of policy options to promote

transparency and international cooperation in exploring geoengineering options along with restrictions on reckless efforts to manipulate the climate system.”

Geo-Engineering Decision-Making: Emerging

Ethical issues are addressed at least lightly in most essays and discussions of CxEng, and to my reading most authors follow Schneider’s (2008) admonition to raise cautions early and often in their work. Jamieson (1996) laid out criteria to judge whether “intentional climate change” is “morally permissible”: “(1) the project is technically feasible; (2) its consequences can be predicted reliably; (3) it would produce states that are socio-economically preferable to the alternatives; (4) implementing the project would not seriously and systematically violate any important, well-founded ethical principles or considerations” (p. 326).

Jamieson’s criteria No. 2 and 3 could be the Catch-22 of CxEng: The *predictability* of effects of CxEng is probably in the same ball-park as the *predictability* of global warming effects. Attribution uncertainty that dogs purposeful WxMod (say, for hurricane modification, which essentially killed it as viable science), may be a key factor in the technology’s acceptance and longevity, suggest that it will be very difficult for us to arrive at the juncture where we know global warming’s negative consequences well enough to design and embark on geo-engineering schemes that meet Jamieson’s criteria. Schneider (2008) even suggested that the total climate change (cooling plus warming) across the globe might be *increased* by geo-engineering schemes that nevertheless achieve their goal of GMT cooling and stabilization, suggesting that losers might be legion even in an effective program.

Sarewitz and Nelson (2008) recently laid out three criteria for judging technological fixes to problems like global warming: (1) the technology must largely embody the cause–effect relationship connecting problem to solution; (2) the effects of the technological fix must be assessable using relatively unambiguous or uncontroversial criteria; and (3) research and development is most likely to contribute decisively to solving a social problem when it focuses on improving a standardized technical core that already exists (quoted from pp. 871-872). Like Jamieson’s criteria, the three standards would be difficult to meet; Pielke (2009) already judges geo-engineering as failing all three. Though, many technologies and fixes in use already in various sectors, from agriculture to technology, would also fall short, the three criteria provide searching questions for a geo-engineering TA.

Type I and Type II Mistakes

One solid lesson from hazards and technology studies is to avoid becoming fixed on one approach early in the assessment and development process. This may already affect the range of options discussed in geo-engineering, where aerosol loading of the stratosphere has garnered the greatest attention, while many other ideas languish less examined (MacCracken 2006). As with other cases of decisions in the face of deep uncertainty, the pay-off matrix is terribly fuzzy. Analysts point out in this case the need to lean toward “robust” decisions: those that work out over a larger range of eventual future outcomes (as opposed to maximized expected utility or even pure pre-caution; Lempert and Collins, 2007). Attention to the full range of weather and climate modification knowledge and potentials allows us to call on past experience, to anticipate objections and pit-falls, and perhaps to create an assessment scheme that strikes a good balance between the probability of accepting bad, and rejecting good, CxGE ideas.

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