

Originally posted at [Harvard's Solar Geoengineering Research Program](#).

Much of my work concerns [solar geoengineering](#), a set of proposals to block or reflect a small portion of incoming sunlight in order to reduce global warming. Unfortunately, the discourse is rife with specious, misrepresented, and outright false statements – many of which are consistent with intuition – that are repeated until they acquire a sheen of quasi-truth. The story behind a recent news article reveals how a few activist groups, with the news media's cooperation, generate and spread such claims.



A couple weeks ago (Aug 23), [the Agence France-Presse \(AFP\) news service reported](#) that the [International Organization for Standardization \(ISO\)](#) “touts” solar geoengineering as a “climate fix” on behalf of “the fossil fuel industry.” The ISO is a staid, long-standing body that, unsurprisingly, develops international standards for diverse products, services, and processes. According to the article, the ISO is purportedly advancing this agenda via its draft standards for reducing [radiative forcing](#). This is the effect that greenhouse gases and other “climate forcers” (such as clouds and aerosols) have on the planet’s energy balance, which in turn cause global warming. The AFP article didn’t seem right to me, and [I tweeted at the time](#):

I’m sceptical because

- 1 The ISO is a very measured, moderate organization
- 2 That committee is also working on standards for e.g. [greenhouse gases] reductions
3. That article has a breathlessly sensationalist tone.

The article also repeatedly quoted the director of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) – which previously co-published with the Heinrich Boell

Foundation (HBF) [a highly misleading report on the fossil fuel industry and geoengineering](#) – while providing no balance, much less corrective. And it claimed that the ISO “defines the Paris [climate agreement] temperature goals as ‘problematic’,” which seems well beyond the organization’s mandate and cautious practice.

I asked the author of the AFP article for a copy of the draft ISO standards. He kindly obliged. They are what I thought: an effort to assist private and public actors in reducing various emissions and other activities that contribute to global warming. It barely mentions solar geoengineering, only defining it. Moreover, the draft calls the Paris Agreement’s temperature goals “problematic” only in the sense that global warming lags several years behind changes in radiative forcing. In other words, the ISO sees radiative forcing as a more cautious metric than temperature. Consistent with my reading, the [ISO subsequently tweeted](#) (Aug 28) “The Working Group voted unanimously that SRM [i.e. solar geoengineering] is completely out of scope.”

However, before sending me the ISO’s draft standards, the journalist accidentally sent the wrong attachment: a private briefing by CIEL, HBF, and the ETC Group – the leading purveyors of spurious geoengineering assertions. Notably, the briefing made the same spurious claims as the AFP article:

[The draft] Promotes and facilitates the deployment and commercialization of internationally controversial, risky and uncertain geoengineering activities, such as solar or earth radiation modification technologies...

[The draft] describes the Paris agreement’s focus on temperature targets as “problematic”...

[The ISO] driven by the interests and agendas of industry actors...

This confirmed my suspicion that the article merely echoed activists’ views. The AFP journalist either was a dupe of these groups or an activist whose agenda aligns with these groups.

After some internal debate, I wrote a critical email to AFP’s editors. The next day (Aug 30), [AFP published an article](#) that says “Draft international guidance on how industry measures its efforts to fight global warming will not include untested

geoengineering technology.” However, the new article does not point to their previous inaccurate reporting, instead merely noting that “AFP last week reported on the draft.” Furthermore, the new article claims that “Environmental groups and climate scientists raised concerns over the draft guidance,” yet—as far as I’ve seen—the only environmental groups that were worried were the ones whispering in the journalist’s ear, and [the only scientists who expressed concerned had read AFP’s first, false article](#) – which remains online, uncorrected.

This story—already outrageous—wraps up with two final “kickers.” First, the day after the ISO’s clarifying tweet (i.e., Aug 29), the ETC Group—the anti-technology activist group that was among those behind the private briefing sent to AFP—[issued a statement](#)\*. Feigning surprise, they led with “A report from Agence France-Presse has revealed a new effort to establish the basis for a market for ‘climate credits’ for the use of geoengineering technologies”, using AFP’s “revelation” to insinuate that shadowy business interests are pushing for solar geoengineering to become the central focus of global climate policy. Of course, that “revelation” was based on the ETC Group’s own (misleading) work.

Second, how did these groups react to AFP’s admission that the ISO’s draft standards were not a covert vehicle for solar geoengineering? [Geoengineering Monitor](#)—a collaboration of the ETC Group, HBF, and two other groups—immediately [tweeted](#)

Great news! “On Friday, the ISO stressed that SRM and similar untested geoengineering schemes were “out of the scope” of the guidance.”

linking to the new AFP article. (The ETC Group quickly retweeted this.) In other words, the activist groups tried to frame the disclosure that their original concerns were unwarranted because they were grounded in their own specious assertions as a victory. Is this a tragedy or comedy?

The lesson here is not about this specific incident, but instead concerns how misleading, misrepresented, and outright false statements are produced and propagated within the solar geoengineering discourse. First, activist groups make claims that *seem* true but are deeply spurious and, in some ways, demonstrably wrong. Then they work with a journalist (often, it seems, at *The Guardian*: e.g. [1](#), [2](#))—who is either duped by the groups or aligned with their agenda—who

publishes the assertions as news. Finally, the activists point to the published news as revelation of a purported previously hidden truth. (And as a backup plan, if the assertion is shown to be false, then they can try to claim a victory.) It is a cycle in which misleading and deceptive statements are generated, laundered, and repeated. In this case, only an email sent in error revealed the disturbing mechanism at play.

In the past, where I have noticed problematic nonsense in the solar geoengineering discourse — including from bad-faith actors — I have tried to call it out ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)). But following this episode, I wonder how often the ETC Group, HBF and CIEL have run this play before. In this environment, how can a layperson, a graduate student, a policy maker, or even [a leading climate scientist](#) identify what is true and what isn't? I, and others, recommend being skeptical of the pronouncements and publications of CIEL, HBF and ETC Group regarding solar geoengineering, as they have shown themselves to be serial peddlers of rubbish in this space. Fortunately, it is my sense that news coverage of this important topic is gradually improving. And hopefully, the AFP and other outlets will perform their due diligence in future.

*Update (21 Sept 2019):* A [writer at DeSmog \(“Clearing the PR pollution that clouds climate science”\)](#) [has repeated the claim](#) that the ISO draft standards “raise concerns about promoting geoengineering as a climate solution [and] certainly indicate geoengineering as a likely option.” The post links to the first AFP article but, notably, not to the second one that corrected the first. And the [ETC Group published their previously private briefing on the standards and reiterated that “geoengineering was very much ‘in \[the standards\]’ scope.”](#)\*\* In an accompanying comment on Twitter, [the ETC Group claims “References to geoengineering now removed.”](#) implying that the ISO has edited the draft standards.

Given that these have now been posted elsewhere, here are [the draft ISO standards \(unlike at DeSmog, as a searchable PDF\)](#) and [the briefing from the ETC Group et al that I received from the AFP reporter \[PDF\]](#), which has some differences with the version at the ETC Group's website.

\* *In an apparent typing error, the ETC Group page gives a date of “August 08,” but [the organization's home page](#) accurately lists it as “29 Aug.”*

\*\* *In another apparent error, the ETC Group page gives a date of “September 09,” but [the organization's home page](#) accurately lists it as “19 Sept.”*

