Statement Regarding Allegations
Concerning Dr. Willie Soon

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1. Background

Dr. Wei-Hock “Willie” Soon has been a research physicist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA) for 25 years. Dr. Soon’s research specialty is the influence of changes in solar activity on the Earth’s climate and the study of solar-type stars. Since 1994, together with co-authors, he has written more than 60 peer-reviewed articles and two scholarly books on these and related topics. In 2003 the Smithsonian presented Dr. Soon with an institutional award in “official recognition of work performance reflecting a high standard of accomplishment”.

Recently, articles appearing in the Boston Globe, The New York Times, the Guardian, and other media outlets have claimed that Dr. Soon failed to disclose that some of the funding for research described in several of his recent scientific papers came from “fossil fuel interests”.

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These attacks appear to be calculated to damage Dr. Soon’s reputation, to undermine the credibility of his research results, and to threaten his employment at the Center for Astrophysics by improperly suggesting that he has acted unethically and dishonestly. In my opinion, these allegations are malicious and should be retracted.

2. The non-governmental grant-funding process

Before responding to the untrue criticisms, it is first necessary to explain how the grant-funding process works for scientists who are supported by what is sometimes called “soft money,” i.e. scientists who receive no faculty stipend as of right, but must raise their salary out of contributions made by outside donors.

Many scientists conduct research in the absence of a permanent salary by relying on government organizations, corporations, or foundations for grants. Individual grants are usually tied to specific research projects. At the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, all proposed scientific works must be pre-approved by heads of divisions (in Dr. Soon’s case, the Solar, Stellar and Planetary Physics Division of the Center for Astrophysics) as well as by the Institution’s director’s office. This is why all grants awarded are automatically known to the Institution at once, but are not actuated until the office of the Director has approved not only the grant itself but also the purpose for which it was awarded.

In the late 1990s, the then Director of the CfA, Dr. Irwin Shapiro, issued an express instruction that all staff should list their affiliation on published papers as “Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics”, an instruction that Dr. Soon has always complied with and that remains standing today.

The “Statement of Values and Code of Ethics” of the Smithsonian Institution signifies that the institution itself provides the oversight to prevent any undue influence by outside parties (such as donors or sponsors) on any scholarship or publications that stem from externally donated funds. That statement includes the following:

*The Smithsonian adheres to professional standards and best practices in seeking and accepting support from these [outside] sources to ensure that fundraising activities support the Smithsonian mission and protect the Smithsonian’s reputation, integrity, and independence, while regarding donors and sponsors with the highest level of respect and establishing relationships characterized by forthrightness and honesty.*
The provision of this assurance that there is no conflict of interest between donors and researchers, along with other management services, is why the Smithsonian deducts approximately 30 to 40 percent of any external grant to cover its own overhead costs. From the remainder, the grantee must pay their own stipend, as well as any necessary research assistance, equipment, and other costs. As a working scientist, Dr. Soon has no authority to sign a research contract to receive a grant, let alone to decide and dictate the terms of such contracts.

As has been shown by facsimiles of the contracts between the Smithsonian and relevant external providers posted online here:


… it is the case that Dr. Soon’s signature is not on any of the contracts between donors and the Smithsonian Institution to support his research. It is therefore the Smithsonian that carries the responsibility for accepting and properly administering the external payments that support Dr Soon’s work.

After a contract relevant to a scientist’s expertise has been written and approved by the outside funder, the scientist’s job is to undertake scientific research in the agreed area and to report the results in papers written either on his/her own or in conjunction with scientific colleagues. Dr. Soon and other working scientists like him are paid by the Smithsonian, not by the external funder, to carry out those duties. Simply put, Dr. Soon is employed by the Smithsonian to conduct research paid for by external grants obtained by the Smithsonian.

In 2012, after considering a Greenpeace FOIA request that started in 2010, the Smithsonian elected to make public the details of all contracts and email messages that related to the funding of Dr. Soon’s stipends (see Section 5). Claims made in recent weeks that Dr. Soon or the Smithsonian had failed to properly disclose information as to who has funded his past research are therefore simply nonsensical.

More generally, and because of the way in which the Smithsonian oversees and manages outside funding sources, simply by identifying himself on publications as being engaged by the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, Dr. Soon makes full and sufficient disclosure that he has no funding conflicts regarding his research. No further disclosure of funding sources is necessary because, for a scientist employed in this fashion, there simply are none.
3. The 2015 Monckton et al. paper in *Science Bulletin*

The current media-led commentary regarding Dr. Soon’s recent research began after he had co-authored a paper titled “Why Models Run Hot: Results From an Irreducibly Simple Climate Model,” published in January 2015 in China’s leading learned journal of scientific research, the *Science Bulletin*, published by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and National Natural Science Foundation of China. The paper is available online at www.scibull.com.

The paper, written with co-authors Lord Christopher Monckton, Professor David Legates, and Dr. William Briggs, concludes that a doubling the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere, which will take 70 years or so, might eventually make the world warmer by as little as 1 degree Celsius, not the 3, 5, or even 10 degrees Celsius that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and various government scientists have suggested. This finding is consistent with a substantial and growing body of recent peer-reviewed research on the question of how much global warming human industrial activities may cause, but is a much lesser warming than usually cited by environmental groups.

A review of the past publications of the four authors of the *Science Bulletin* paper reveals an extensive background of publishing on the subject of climate change. They presumably wrote the paper because they believed other researchers would find their simple model of the climate interesting and helpful. They were right: the paper has been downloaded more than 22,000 times (combined paper downloads and abstract readings), more than any other paper in the publication’s history.

When asked, in the normal course of submitting the paper, to disclose funding that might constitute a conflict of interest, Dr. Soon and his co-authors reported that they received no funding of any kind from any source towards the preparation and writing of the *Science Bulletin* paper. The paper was therefore researched and written entirely on their own time and at their own expense. As they stated to the journal, they therefore could have no conflicts of interest.

It is surely now time to focus on the science itself, which media commentary so far has signally failed to do. Using the model developed by Monckton and his colleagues, anyone with a little math and physics knowledge can determine how climate sensitivity changes relative to carbon dioxide concentration using nothing more complex than a pocket calculator. By writing their *Science Bulletin* paper, these scientists have made climate science accessible to all – and as the record number of downloads of the paper and its abstract demonstrates, scientists worldwide are responding to their initiative with enthusiasm.
4. The role of environmental activists in *ad hominem* attacks

There is nothing new about Greenpeace and other environmental groups accusing non-government funded scientists of having conflicts of interest because of the putatively unwholesome source of their research funding. In the past such accusations have sometimes garnered momentary attention when repeated in newspapers and on popular websites, but they have rightly been rejected as false or irrelevant by the editors of academic journals and by academics who understand the non-governmental grant-making process.

Kert Davies is a long-time Greenpeace staffer who in 2014 started a spin-off group called the Climate Investigations Center (www.climateinvestigations.org). Perhaps alarmed by the findings of the Monckton *et al.* article in *Science Bulletin*, Mr. Davies initiated the false accusation that Dr. Soon had failed to reveal to the editors of that journal the non-governmental grants that the Smithsonian Institution had used to support payment of his stipend in the past. The accusation was first made public in an article in the *Boston Globe* in which it was also admitted that the editors of the *Science Bulletin* had not responded to Mr. Davies’ inquiry as to whether or not they agreed with the accusation.

The *Boston Globe* news story and the documents that Davies obtained from the Smithsonian Institution years earlier became the basis for a series of newspaper stories, blog posts, and even an online campaign demanding that the Smithsonian Institution discipline or terminate its association with Dr. Soon (http://act.forecastthefacts.org/sign/willie_soon/). In parallel, a series of intimidating letters were issued by U.S. Congressman Raul Grijalva to university leaders, and from some three U.S. senators to corporations and “think tanks” demanding information about their funding of climate scientists.

Remarkably, at the time these stories and letters were written the editors of the *Science Bulletin* had not said Dr. Soon or his coauthors violated its guidelines for disclosure and conflict of interest, and they still have not. In other words, the “news hook” for the story was phony. Nevertheless, and alarmingly, Dr. Soon and his coauthors have been accused of violating professional ethics, and even of being paid to lie about climate science, in some of the largest circulation newspapers in the world. While many scientists have rushed to their defense, some (mostly those who are avowed alarmists in the global warming debate) have used the occasion to further undermine, attack and insult the thousands of independent scientists who do not see the minor extra warming caused by industrial carbon dioxide emissions as posing a significant global environmental threat.

It is easy to conclude that the attacks on Dr. Soon and his coauthors are being made at this time in order to divert attention away from the embarrassing scientific questions that their recent
paper raises about the present “official” version of global-warming science. To the degree that proves to be the case, then shame on Dr. Soon’s critics for this squalid tactic and shame on the media for allowing themselves to be so easily duped, yet again, by anti-scientific *ad hominem* rumours promulgated by those with strong vested interests.

The victimization of Willie Soon and other independent climate scientists is now gathering pace towards being the most disgraceful example of politicization of modern science that we have yet seen.

**5. The application of Freedom of Information Act rules**

An important precedent in the public disclosure of sources of research funding and related research matters in the U.S. that is especially relevant to the matter under discussion was set by the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics between 2010 and 2012.

At that time, the center decided – against advice from 57 distinguished scientists, including Dr. Soon’s former divisional director, Dr. Eugene Avrett, and a 1993 Chemistry Nobel Prize laureate, Dr. Kary Mullis – that Dr. Soon’s personal emails, and all related grant proposals and details, should be made publicly available via their release to Greenpeace under a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. This release was made despite the fact that the Smithsonian Institution is believed to be legally exempt from responding to such requests. The concerned scientists warned in 2010:

> This request by Greenpeace, if acceded to, will do little to contribute to a healthy public discourse but instead, it will set a precedent that academic institutions will disclose private information to any advocacy group that wishes to attack scientists with whom they disagree. If advocacy groups know that they can intimidate and harass scientists, then this will become the norm and science will be irreparably damaged.

The letter from the 57 scientists can be found online at http://heartland.org/sites/default/files/06-07-10_letter_of_support_for_willie_soon.pdf.

It was obvious what would happen, and it now has. The information Dr. Soon truthfully disclosed to the Smithsonian for it to release externally is being used by Greenpeace and its allies to attack him, his colleagues, and the Smithsonian Institution itself. This is being done by exploiting the public’s (and apparently major newspapers’) lack of knowledge as to how the non-governmental grant-making process works to insulate scientists from potential conflicts of interest. (See Section 2.)
6. A Smithsonian audit?

To its credit, the Smithsonian Institution initially defended Dr. Soon from Kert Davies’ attack. In an article in The Guardian, a British newspaper, Christine Pulliam, a spokeswoman for the Center for Astrophysics, was quoted saying:

> Academic freedom is critically important. The Smithsonian stands by the process by which the research results of all of its scholars are peer reviewed and vetted by other scientists. This is the way that the scientific process works. The funding entities, regardless of their affiliation, have no influence on the research.

However, on February 22, 2015, the Smithsonian Institution issued the following statement:

> The Smithsonian is greatly concerned about the allegations surrounding Dr. Willie Soon’s failure to disclose funding sources for his climate change research. The Smithsonian is taking immediate action to address the issue:

> Acting Secretary Albert Horvath has asked the Smithsonian Inspector General to review the matter.

> Horvath will also lead a full review of Smithsonian ethics and disclosure policies governing the conduct of sponsored research to ensure they meet the highest standards.

> Wei-Hock (Willie) Soon is a part-time researcher at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Mass. He was hired to conduct research on long-term stellar and solar variability. The Smithsonian does not fund Dr. Soon; he pursues external grants to fund his research.

> The Smithsonian does not support Dr. Soon’s conclusions on climate change. The Smithsonian’s official statement on climate change, based upon many decades of scientific research, points to human activities as a cause of global warming.

Source: http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/smithsonian-statement-dr-wei-hock-willie-soon

A few days later, on February 25, the Institute’s Interim Under Secretary for Science, Dr. John Kress, advised Smithsonian staff by letter that:
Distinguished scientist Rita Colwell has agreed to lead an independent review of the Smithsonian’s policies concerning conflicts of interest in the conduct of sponsored research and scientific publication.

It currently remains unclear whether Dr. Colwell’s review is in addition to, or instead of, one or other of the two previously announced reviews by the Inspector General and by Acting Secretary Alan Horvath.

Dr. Soon has indicated to the author that he is in principle content that his institution should investigate the media attacks against him. In normal circumstances, onlookers would anticipate that any such review would conclude that the accusations against Dr. Soon are improper and malicious. But the statement made by the Smithsonian makes it appear as though a proper and disinterested review by the Smithsonian is no longer possible.

In the first instance, this is because in conducting any such review the Smithsonian is in effect investigating itself. The Smithsonian accepted financial support from external entities, not Dr. Soon. The Smithsonian submitted the contracts, agreed to their terms, signed the contracts, and holds the contracts. It received the financial support, not Dr. Soon.

At least two assertions in the Smithsonian’s statement imply a strong bias against Dr. Soon. First, the phrase “allegations surrounding Dr. Soon’s failure to disclose funding sources for his climate change research” strongly suggests that the Institution has already determined that Dr. Soon failed to disclose his sources of funds. It is surely doubtful that the Smithsonian Institution can have already reviewed the often complex and confusingly inconsistent rules that scientific journals have for disclosing conflicts of interest, and in particular whether or not Dr. Soon has complied with them in every case. In any case, compliance is a matter for journal editors to supervise in direct liaison with the authors involved. The Smithsonian’s choice of wording was an open invitation to unethical commentators to persist in their libels against Dr. Soon.

Further bias against Dr. Soon is found in this part of the Smithsonian’s statement: “The Smithsonian does not support Dr. Soon’s conclusions on climate change. The Smithsonian’s official statement on climate change, based upon many decades of scientific research, points to human activities as a cause of global warming.”

First, it is surely not the business of the Smithsonian to say – except by way of peer-reviewed papers by its researchers – whether or not it supports any of its staff members’ particular scientific conclusions on climate change, or on any other topic.
Second, the statement implies that “Dr. Soon’s conclusions on climate change” include finding human activities are not “a cause of global warming”. For otherwise why would the institution have bothered to mention that its own “official statement on climate change ... points to human activities as a cause of global warming”? Yet at no time has Dr. Soon ever said, written, or even implied that human activities are not a cause of global warming. Indeed, Dr. Soon and his coauthors in the Science Bulletin paper state that returning some carbon dioxide to the atmosphere from which it originally came will cause some global warming, all other things being equal. At issue is not whether human activities are a cause of global warming but rather how much warming they might cause.

The Smithsonian’s implication that Dr. Soon has reached the conclusion that human activities are not a cause of global warming is, in the circumstances, gravely damaging to him, since it suggests he repudiates (for instance) such proven scientific results as the fundamental equation of radiative transfer.

These evident signs of bias make it clear that any investigation into Dr. Soon’s performance should be chaired by a senior scientist who is not employed by the Smithsonian Institution. Instead, such an investigation ought to be completely independent of the Smithsonian’s management and by someone who has not declared public support for the alarmist Greenpeace view on global warming. Given that Dr. Rita Colwell is on public record as presuming a causal relationship between “global warming” and the spread of cholera, these reasonable requirements for objectivity rule out as Committee chairs the two already nominated senior Smithsonian staff and Dr. Colwell as well.

These remarks apply specifically to the Smithsonian’s announcement of a review of Dr. Soon’s performance. Of course, the Smithsonian is free to name whoever it wants to review its own practices and written rules concerning conflicts of interest in the conduct of sponsored research and scientific publication.

7. How well have the media informed the public about global warming?

More generally, and the issue here being the adequacy and truthfulness of the media’s everyday coverage of the global warming issue, there is a need to assess the degree to which headlines about the details of Dr. Soon’s external research support address a significant issue alongside other climate-related news in the offing.

The articles attacking Dr. Soon and other climate scientists are part of a larger problem, namely the media’s skewed coverage of global warming, climate science and conflict of interest.
allegations. The various media outlets have a long history of exaggerating the certainty of scientific understanding of climate and weather as well as enthusiastically promulgating alarmist forecasts of future climate conditions. The media routinely hype the most alarmist scenarios no matter how implausible or weak the scientific evidence, while dismissing and even outright censoring those voices in the science community, no matter how credible, that express skepticism and present a more balanced perspective on the issue.

Though you would not know it from reading *The New York Times*, atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations have risen since 1990 at a rate faster than the IPCC’s “business-as-usual” prediction made that year, yet the estimated global temperature has risen at less than half the rate the IPCC then predicted with what it called “substantial confidence.” According to the Remote Sensing Systems’ satellite global-temperature dataset, there has now been no global warming at all for more than the past 18 years. All other datasets show little warming and all are within statistical shouting distance of the RSS result.

Over those same 18 years, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have risen by 10 percent, which represents more than 30 percent of all the human-related carbon dioxide injected into the atmosphere since the start of the industrial revolution. Yet there is no warming.

Hurricanes, tropical cyclones, typhoons, extra-tropical storms, floods, and droughts all were once predicted by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to increase in intensity, frequency, or duration. The news media were happy to promote these forecasts. But many scientists and recently the IPCC itself have found and reported that none of these extreme weather phenomena are on the increase. What can be safely said is that the number of deaths caused by extreme weather worldwide continues to decline rapidly.

Also, sea level has been predicted to rise rapidly, but the European Envisat satellite showed sea level to have risen at a rate of just 1.3 inches per century from 2004–2012. At the same time, the GRACE gravitational-anomaly satellites, the most accurate method of measurement we have, showed sea level actually falling from 2003–2009. According to Professor Nils-Axel Mörner, who has written more than 600 learned papers in his 50-year career studying sea level, the global average sea level may not be rising at all at the moment.

Though readily available from high-quality blog sites and publications such as the *Climate Change Reconsidered* series produced by the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC), recent evidence suggesting human-caused climate change is not a crisis has not been reported properly by the so-called mainstream media. In fact, the media have been shamefully negligent in reporting these matters, perhaps because the new non-alarmist consensus
so self-evidently contradicts their own past headlines and oft-time nearly hysterical news and editorial coverage of the global warming issue.

It is surely undeniable that mainstream science and environmental journalists have failed to report the absence of global warming in the past decade and a half, or the absence of warming’s predicted and supposedly apocalyptic consequences. How repellent, therefore, it is that these same “journalists” have the impertinence to question Dr. Soon’s honesty or credentials as a climate scientist.

Instead of reporting factually and honestly on the findings reported in the *Science Bulletin* article, which is the most widely read and controversial scientific article on the global warming issue to be published so far in 2015, reporters are instead reprinting news releases written by environmental activists that mount *ad hominem* attacks on messenger scientists and completely obscure the genuine scientific debate that is taking place.

**8. How does a scientist engender a conflict of interest anyway?**

The notion of “conflict of interest” declarations is a relatively new phenomenon for scientific publications, especially in solar and climate physics. Though a well understood and applicable procedure in political or financial matters, it is far from clear that declarations of interest have any part to play in the physical sciences.

In physical science, the scientific method itself ensures the accuracy, applicability, and usefulness of results.

The contrary suggestion is that if the money used to fund research comes from a source that can be identified with a publicly expressed a point of view on the matter under investigation, then a scientist’s conclusions must be suspect. The idea is nonsensical for it completely ignores both the strengths and the whole point of the scientific method.

Science is different from politics or commerce in that who pays for a piece of research – whether it should be Genghis Khan or Mother Teresa – is simply irrelevant to making judgments about the validity of the research product, which stands or falls depending upon its consistency with the facts and the ability of other scientists to independently confirm the result.

The idea of such conflicts of interest is not only scientifically invalid but also not fruitful, because to argue thus effectively implies that virtually all scientists must then have a conflict of interest all the time. The only exceptions might be scientists with ample private means who are
working unpaid, but even they are likely to be living off the interest of past investments that relied on government or non-governmental funding.

Without gainsaying what is written above, knowing that a grant will be awarded or renewed dependent upon a researcher reaching a certain finding by manipulating data can of course be corrupting and lead to scientific fraud. Recent articles suggest that the hyper-competitive nature of much modern research is leading to an increase in such fraud (see, for example, frequent editorials in the journal *Nature* for regular commentary on this debate). However, to my knowledge no substantive evidence exists that the relatively recent practice of requiring scientists to sign conflict of interest declarations has acted to reduce genuinely fraudulent research.

Many scientists choose to pursue research projects that they judge are likely to be published in leading journals, in some cases in the hope of attracting continuing research funding from sources that have a partial or prejudiced view of the topic in question. But to the degree that this is a problem, it exists regardless of the source of funding, meaning that disclosure of funding sources does not provide a remedy.

For example, under the present U.S. administration, the Environmental Protection Agency has made clear that it wishes to embrace the most alarmist voices in the global warming debate, even to the point of trying to silence scientists within its ranks who dissent from the alarmist view (e.g., Dr. Alan Carlin). Similarly, some private corporations and foundations may also make their positions clear, though they are usually less likely to publically support just one side of a matter that has significant political implications. Receiving funding from either of two sides to a public debate is not a conflict of interest in any meaningful sense, given that funding from all sources possesses an equal potential for corruption. The only true test of quality, once again, is not the source of the funding but whether any research product is consistent with known facts and can be independently confirmed or replicated by other scientists.

Those arguing for the disclosure of funding sources intend that action to provide a signal of potential bias, but the reality is that disclosure also routinely implies bias where none actually exists. Worse, well-intended disclosure of funding sources can become a tool for advocates to launch *ad hominem* attacks against authors, for example the Forecast the Facts’ petition against Dr. Soon mentioned earlier. Threatened disclosure also acts to intimidate those who fund scientists whose research contradicts the conventional wisdom on particular topics, as exemplified by recent letters from members of the U.S. Congress to businesses and “think tanks” that have provided funding to independent climate scientists.
Institutions such as the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics provide an assurance to the editors of academic journals, government funding agencies, commercial firms and the popular press, as stated in the Smithsonian’s “Statement of Values and Code of Ethics”,

*that fundraising activities support the Smithsonian mission and protect the Smithsonian’s reputation, integrity, and independence, while regarding donors and sponsors with the highest level of respect and establishing relationships characterized by forthrightness and honesty.*

Stating their affiliation with such organizations enables scientists such as Dr. Soon to send editors and readers the message, accurately and properly, that they are pursuing real science without fear or favour, unhindered by any conflict of interest.

In summary, science is different from politics or commerce in that judgments about the validity of a research conclusion can be made based on whether that conclusion is consistent with known facts and can be independently confirmed or replicated by other scientists. Who funded the research is simply immaterial.

**9. Conclusions**

The controversy involving Dr. Willie Soon and his coauthors is manufactured and the partisan accusations levelled against them are false. In particular, the editors of the *Science Bulletin* paper by Monckton *et al.* have expressed no concern about any undeclared conflict of interest.

The Smithsonian Institution should therefore stand firmly behind its “Statement of Values and Code of Ethics” in general and Dr. Soon in particular. Regrettably, its public statements suggest that instead it may be trying to distance itself from a courageous scientist from whose outstanding research reputation the Institution has benefitted for 25 years. Any credible investigation that is made into the allegations against Dr. Soon must therefore be chaired by a genuinely independent authority and not by any of the persons so far suggested by the Smithsonian.

As an experienced academic manager, independent scientist and colleague of Dr. Soon, the information available to me indicates that by reporting his affiliation with the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics he followed all applicable rules regarding conflict of interest disclosure. Furthermore, this disclosure adequately conveys the independence and high quality of research that editors, readers and the general public can expect to see from scientists who work for such an esteemed research institution.
The criticism of Dr. Soon is false, mean-spirited, insulting and potentially libelous. Allowing such attacks to stand, and to allow politics and fear tactics to silence Dr. Soon or any other scientist, or to censor scientific publications, would be a personal calumny and a blow against scientific freedom of expression the world over.