

# U.N. Climate Panel to Announce Significant Changes

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U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) head Rajendra Pachauri, left, and Thirteenth Finance Commission Chairman Vijay Kelkar look on at a press conference in New Delhi.

Just one year ago a pronouncement from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was all that was needed to move nations and change [environmental policies](#) around the world. But today, the panel's credibility and even its very existence are in question.

In the wake of its swift and devastating fall from grace, the panel says it will announce "within the next few days" that it plans to make significant though as yet unexplained changes in how it does business.

Brenda Abrar-Milani, an external relations officer at the IPCC's office in Geneva, Switzerland, said changes have been slow in coming because "we have to inform the governments (all 194 member States) of any planned steps, and they are the ones who eventually take decisions on any revision of procedures."

"We put everything on the table and looked at it," she said, explaining that the panel's reforms would be extensive. She refused to detail any of the changes, but she did confirm that are in response to recent scandals involving the panel.

"We used to operate in the dark, and now we seem to be in the spotlight," she said.

But critics of the IPCC say it has been slow to understand the gravity of the crisis it has created, and it is incapable of making significant internal changes. Since the crisis began, the panel's only reaction has been to post two documents to its [Web site](#) -- on Feb. 2 to explain its "principles and procedures," and on Feb. 4 to detail the procedures the panel uses in its reports.

In perhaps an indication of what changes the IPCC may unveil, the British government's official Meteorological Office proposed Monday that the world's climate scientists [start all over again on a "grand challenge"](#) to produce a new, common trove of global temperature data.

The IPCC was created in 1988 to periodically review the state of climate change science. It has issued four reports so far, with a fifth in the works. Governments based their [programs](#) and policies on its findings solely because it was considered the "final word" on the state of the planet's climate. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, its reputation for accuracy and fairness, to a large degree, was responsible for building a consensus around the world that global warming was both real and a potentially devastating phenomenon largely caused by man.

But the panel, which has predicted massive and devastating storms as a result of global warming, ran into the perfect storm itself, beginning with the leak of thousands of e-mails from the prestigious climate program at East Anglia University in England.

Those e-mails raised troubling questions about the panel's impartiality and how deeply politics influenced its decisions. They show scientists discussing how to avoid [sharing information](#) with skeptics despite freedom of information laws and how to keep people with contrary ideas out of peer-reviewed journals. Dubbed "climate-gate," the piercing of the aura of its authority prompted many to take a deeper look at the panel's workings.

Then came more "gates": [Africa-gate](#), an exaggerated prediction of drought and crop losses on the continent; [glacier-gate](#), a false claim that Himalayan glaciers would disappear in two decades; disaster-gate, an unsubstantiated claim that extreme [weather](#), caused by global warming, was responsible for growing billions in financial losses; [Amazon-gate](#), its prediction that the Amazon rain forest was dangerously shrinking; and Pachauri-gate, named for the panel's chief.

In the first four "gates," source materials were examined to determine the scientific basis for the panel's claims, and in each case the materials used to support panel assessments were flawed or not peer-reviewed.

Then came Pachauri-gate. Press reports revealed that the head of the panel, Rajendra Pachauri, an Indian engineer,

lived an opulent lifestyle despite a meager wage and ran a consulting business on the side that presented severe conflict of interest issues. [Greenpeace](#) called for Pachauri to step down. And in a severe slap to his credibility, his own country set up its own climate panel to assess emerging scientific climate [studies](#) — the same job the IPCC does. Because the panel was supposed to conduct the most rigorous examination of data possible, one error was bad enough. But the onslaught of sloppiness and errors was so devastating that many of the panel's strongest supporters called for reform and, in some cases, abandonment of the panel.

Mike Hulme of East Anglia University in England, who has played critical roles in the panel's earlier reports, wrote in Nature magazine that the IPCC "is no longer fit" to fulfill the purpose it was set up for in the 1980s because science and public involvement had changed. He suggested breaking the panel into three parts and allowing each to focus on a different aspect of global warming. One would look at the pure science, the second would look at regional changes and the third would focus on policy analysis and propose options based on new scientific findings.

Canadian climate scientist Andrew Weaver, who helped write the last three IPCC reports, also called for a massive overhaul and the resignation of Pachauri. He said that the panel had become "tainted by political advocacy" and that its approach to science should be radically changed. He told the Canwest News Service that the panel should act only as a neutral advisory body and not as an advocate of any political goal, and he said that "there has been a dangerous crossing of that line."

Whether the as-yet-unannounced IPCC reforms will be enough to save the panel's credibility and status remains to be seen. But it will be an uphill battle.

Steve McIntyre, who also worked at the IPCC and whose blog, [Climate Audit](#), has been one of the most vocal critics of the panel, says that while cries for reform have become loud, "very little thought has yet been put into what changes have to be made."

"I don't think they plan to change very much," he said. "They just don't know how to reform it."