

# Climate change skeptics rely on straw-man arguments | Guest column

Colin Polsky and Ben Kirtman

Have you ever invested in the stock market? Wise investors don't buy their stocks based on straw-man arguments, wishful thinking, cherry-picked evidence or name-calling.

Instead, wise investing requires researching trends in the company's stock price, plus the broader market factors affecting the stock's future value. You never know for sure if the stock price will increase, but you do your best to make an informed decision based on all the best evidence — not just the data you like.

It might seem strange to make these points — doesn't everyone agree with these common-sense principles of respectful critical thinking?

Unfortunately, all too often the climate change discussion fails this test. Yet the same principles that apply to wise investing also apply to understanding climate change.

There are some valid questions about climate change. Here we hope to advance the dialogue by respectfully challenging some common misleading arguments.

George Iliff and Edward Klima argue in their guest column for TCPalm, “Global warming scientists only claim that carbon dioxide serves as a trigger to cause water vapor to provide significant additional global warming.”

Here the authors deliver a false straw-man. The truth is the bedrock of climate change science: carbon dioxide is a low-level greenhouse gas, but it is important and its levels are rising exponentially. The Earth hasn't seen such levels for at least the past 800,000 years.

It also is important to pay attention to greenhouse gases other than carbon dioxide. Compared to carbon dioxide, these gases can be 30 to 25,000 times more potent; their levels also are rising dramatically.

It's wishful thinking to suggest that because carbon dioxide represents a small share of our atmosphere, increasing levels of carbon dioxide — or other greenhouse gases — do not matter for global temperatures.

There is zero debate that carbon dioxide is an important factor in controlling Earth's temperature patterns. But no one claims carbon dioxide is the only factor.

For example, volcanic eruptions can temporarily depress global temperatures even if carbon dioxide levels are rising. The global scientific community has accepted these facts for more than a century.

Unfortunately, the documented sea-level rise trends in South Florida appear to be accelerating. We cannot ignore this data.

As Americans, we are concerned that much of the United States' eastern seaboard, including Florida, is experiencing rising sea levels.

Given how flat Florida is, many local scientists, decision-makers and business leaders — from both parties — have concluded we need to take action now.

Florida residents already are experiencing more flooding problems than in recent decades. There is no reason to believe the trend will stop anytime soon.

There are many arguments presented by climate change deniers. Some of these challenges are valid and helpful. (See [www.skepticalscience.com](http://www.skepticalscience.com).) But others are not because they don't follow basic principles of respectful critical thinking.

Just as it is unwise to buy stocks based on straw-man arguments and cherry-picked information, so too is it unwise to form an opinion on climate change without respectful critical thinking.

*Colin Polsky is director of the Center for Environmental Studies and professor of geosciences at Florida Atlantic University. Ben Kirtman is director of the Cooperative Institute for Marine & Atmospheric Studies and of the Center for Computational Science Climate and Environmental Hazards Program and professor of in the Department of Atmospheric Sciences at University of Miami.*