

Global Warming on Trial - Sixth-graders decide humans are not to blame

By Ben Ready

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LONGMONT — Humans don't cause global warming, a jury of sixth graders at Trail Ridge Middle School concluded Thursday after hearing opposing arguments from their peers.

"They're pretty young for this kind of thinking. They did great," paleontology teacher Ken Poppe said after the 40-minute "trial" in his classroom. With Earth's warming accepted as a tenet, pre-teen "lawyers" and "scientists" debated whether humans have caused it.

Eleven jurors listened intently as prosecutors and defendants flashed contradictory graphs tracking global temperatures, carbon dioxide levels, polar icecap statistics, volcanic activity and sea surface temperatures — all of which were found Wednesday in the school's computer lab. "The earth has warmed and cooled over many years. If it's caused by CO<sub>2</sub>, why haven't the charts shot up?" Poppe's son and lead prosecutor Caleb argued during a rebuttal.

In a climax that sent half the class to its feet and forced the judge to call for order, opponent Monique Nem slapped a contradictory graph onto the prosecution's table. "We've proven you wrong! The CO<sub>2</sub> levels have shot up," she said.

The jury responded more warmly, however, to Caleb Poppe's response: The graphic cited a Hawaiian source; Hawaii has volcanoes; volcanoes emit CO<sub>2</sub>.

In closing arguments, Alexia Hegy said global temperatures actually decreased in the 1960's, while the global population rose. Humans cannot be at fault, she concluded.

With the final word, defense attorney Sarah Steed countered: "It all comes back to us, the people — not the sun, not the weather. We need to turn off lights when we don't need them. Bikes can work. The environment can be richer."

Seven of 11 jurors decided humans are not to blame, but everyone agreed classroom debates make for fun learning.

"It was a hard decision, because both sides made good points," said student Samantha Roberts.

Ken Poppe said he let students choose which side of the debate to argue. Poppe personally believes global warming is cyclical and not affected by humans, while his

Colorado State University student aide David Richards believes the opposite. Both, however, said they presented both sides equally to the students leading up to Thursday's debate.

"What I think is not the issue. It's what the students dig up and how they present the case," Poppe said.

Only one parent questioned Poppe's decision to hold a global warming debate. That mother expected him to present Al Gore's global warming movie "An Inconvenient Truth" as indisputable facts, Poppe said. After he explained his neutrality in the classroom, the mom allowed her child to participate in the debate, he said.

"You don't understand someone's position until you can argue it to their satisfaction," Poppe said, quoting a famous physicist. "I don't believe in Darwinism either, but I can argue it as well as any Darwinist."

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