

California Government Backs Away from Solar Geoengineering Project - but Doesn't Withdraw

June 17, 2020



The California State government is looking to distance itself from a controversial solar geoengineering project after pressure from civil society and movement groups around the world.

Last July, the California Strategic Growth Council – a part of the California State government with direct ties to Governor Gavin Newsom’s office – announced that its Executive Director, Louise Bedsworth, would be joining the advisory committee of a prominent solar geoengineering project, SCoPEX, hosted at Harvard University. They even issued a press release – featuring the California Strategic Growth Council logo, which features a map of the state – announcing that Bedsworth would be chairing the advisory committee, which aims to legitimize the SCoPEX experiments.

A letter signed by civil society groups from around the world called on Bedsworth and seven other “advisors,” all US-based, to resign.

That press release has now been removed from the Harvard University SCoPEX web site. Strategic Growth Council officials, including Bedsworth, have attempted to backpedal by issuing statements claiming the SGC has nothing to do with SCoPEX, and that Bedsworth is acting in a personal capacity.

SCoPEX is aiming to proceed despite an international moratorium on open-air geoengineering experiments supported by 196 countries that have signed the UN Convention on Biodiversity.

Development of solar geoengineering at a large scale would have serious global impacts, including changes in weather patterns, and potentially floods and droughts affecting the global south. For this reason, groups from around the world have called on all members of the SCoPEX advisory committee to step down.

To date, Bedsworth has not stepped down. The Executive Director of the California Strategic Growth Council continues to serve as the chair of a committee designed to legitimize something it has no authority to authorize — even as the state agency makes efforts to distance itself from previous support for the research. Sign the letter

here.

Response from Kate Gordon, Chair of California Strategic Growth Council and Director of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research

Thank you for reaching out. Louise Bedsworth participates in SCoPEX in her personal capacity; no state resources have been expended on this work and it is unrelated to her work at the Strategic Growth Council. We are working with Harvard to make this clearer on the website; however this was made very clear in the original statement from the advisory committee on their engagement in this work, found at <http://scopexac.com/news-and-updates/>:

"We are contributing to this Committee as individuals with different expertise, experiences, and perspectives, and we will remain true to our values and beliefs as we conduct this work."

Below please find a statement from Dr. Bedsworth. If you have additional comments please address them to Sally Klimp, Executive Coordinator, SCoPEX Advisory Committee, sklimp@g.harvard.edu

Thank you,

Kate Gordon

Statement from Louise Bedsworth, PhD, Chair of the SCoPEX Advisory Committee

June 11, 2020

I am writing this statement in response to recent claims that my participation in this Advisory Committee represents an endorsement of this research by my employer, the California Strategic Growth Council. I will state emphatically that it does not.

I am undertaking this work in a volunteer capacity based on my previous work on broader issues of research governance, related both to solar geoengineering and other topics. The SCoPEX team has received no funding or endorsement by the Council, nor have any state resources been used to support this work. We have updated the Advisory Committee's website to make this clear.

Neither my role nor the committee's role is to enable this research to happen, but rather to establish norms and rules around the scientific, regulatory, and societal repercussions of this work. As our Committee has stated, none of us have entered into this work with a preconceived idea that this research should happen. Rather we are committed to ensuring that if the research proceeds, it does so in a technically and ethically sound manner. We will continue to conduct our work in an open and transparent manner to achieve these goals.

The letter sent to SGC Chair Kate Gordon

June 11, 2020

Kate Gordon, Chair
California Strategic Growth Council
1400 Tenth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Honorable Chair Gordon:

On August 26, 2019, we submitted an Open Letter to California Strategic Growth Council (CSGC) Executive Director Louise Bedsworth in her capacity as Chair of the Advisory Committee for the Stratospheric Controlled Perturbation Experiment (SCoPEX), which is based at Harvard University. The letter was signed by 41 organizations, all of which are members of the international Hands Off Mother Earth (HOME) Campaign, which specifically demands a stop to solar geoengineering experiments such as SCoPEX. (A copy of the Open Letter is attached to this email.)

To date, we have not received a reply from Dr. Bedsworth.

To our knowledge, neither the Governor nor the State Legislature has endorsed geoengineering. The Climate Change Research section of the CSGC website states: "The Climate Change Research Program invests in cross-cutting research investments that build community resilience, integrate land-use and development considerations and facilitate the transformation of California communities."

Further, the CSGC annual report for 2018-2019 (updated November 2019) sets out on page 31: "The results of research will directly benefit disadvantaged communities in California, and all funded projects includes [sic] meaningful engagement throughout the research process with stakeholders and nontraditional research partners."

We fail to see how the SCoPEX experiment is congruent with these commitments. We fear the presence of Dr. Bedsworth on the SCoPEX Advisory Committee may very well give the impression that California and the CSGC are supporting such experiments.

The SCoPEX experiment is part of a body of large-scale solar geoengineering experiments that have the potential to damage Earth's systems. Endorsing such experiments is no small matter, and has the potential to cause much harm.

In the section on "SCoPEX Governance" on the SCoPEX website, (<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/keutschgroup/scopex-governance>) Section 2(d) states that the purpose of the Advisory Committee is "To Advise Harvard University and the SCoPEX project team on several arenas, including ... (d) The need, objectives and possible formats for stakeholder engagement..."

Developing an advisory committee composed of scientists and academics is very different from engaging in a democratic process with communities and other stakeholders. An advisory committee with appointed members may give the appearance of legitimating the SCoPEX experiment, but it is far from being a democratic process involving those who stand to be affected.

As stated in the August 2019 letter from the HOME signatories, “Decisions about geoengineering require global, democratic, transparent governance ... While we understand the Advisory Committee’s aim is to contribute to a consideration of some of the global dimensions of this project, it should be clear that an appointed body cannot replace global, democratic and transparent governance of a geoengineering project that has far-reaching implications.”

If implemented at a large scale, solar geoengineering has the potential for massive negative impacts on the world’s most vulnerable populations. Climate disruptions in Africa and Asia are two of the major risks identified by computer modelling. The sources of food and water for 2 billion people could be disrupted in unexpected ways. Depending on the substance eventually used, the ozone layer, already at risk, could be further damaged.

Indigenous rights obligations require the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples regarding projects that could modify the land, water or air of their territories. This requirement is enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We do not see any recognition of this requirement in any literature pertaining to SCoPEX, or in the goals and objectives of the Advisory Committee.

The UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has placed a moratorium on geoengineering activities, with some exceptions. SCoPEX does not meet the standards for these exceptions.

Given the scale of activities the SCoPEX experiment is being designed to further, which have the potential to be cross-border and cross-boundary once they are implemented, it is nearly impossible to see how informed, democratic participation and consent by potentially affected parties and communities could effectively take place.

Most importantly, experiments like SCoPEX are supported by the fossil fuel industry because they represent a way to continue with extractive, carbon-emitting activities, since the effects would presumably be mitigated by these technologies. Continuing to promote geoengineering as an exit plan undermines the pathway to a just climate transition the world so urgently needs.

It is clear that the California Strategic Growth Council has now linked its interests to the SCoPEX experiment through the leading role its Executive Director has taken as Chair of the SCoPEX Advisory Committee. We are concerned about the appropriateness of this situation, and we believe the citizens of California may feel the same, once the implications of this relationship become more widely known.

On behalf of the communities we work with, our organizations have made a priority of ascertaining what approach the CSGC intends to take regarding the contradictions we have outlined. We look forward to hearing from the CSGC how you intend to remedy the contradiction between Dr. Bedsworth’s participation as a proponent of the SCoPEX project and the mission of CSGC, since this implies de-facto endorsement of geoengineering by the CSGC and, by extension, the Governor of California.

We look forward to your response. You may contact Gopal Dayaneni of ETC Group at gopal@etcgroup.org or by phone at 510.847.3592.

Sincerely,

Gopal Dayaneni, ETC Group
On behalf of the HOME Campaign