

Pitch Suggestions, Samples from The Daily Climate editor Doug Fischer

--The Daily Climate, Doug Fischer's

- Successful Pitch

- Rejected Pitch, and why

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Pitch (successful):

Occasionally in the last few years, scientists have popped up with claims that solar cells made of plastic instead of silicon were about to revolutionize our society. Those claims have been a bit premature, as the sunlight-to-electricity efficiency was low and the plastic deteriorated too quickly.

But labs from California to Germany have been leapfrogging each other with gains in efficiency and lifespan, and it finally appears they really are on the verge. A company based in Massachusetts already is printing plastic solar cells in sheets, and a German company-- which announced a 9.8 percent efficiency record in December-- is starting production this year.

Plastic solar cells have lots of advantages: cheap to make, flexible, lightweight. Mount them in on your car roof, tack them to the side of your house, put them on your backpack, or string them up between huts in a remote village-- you've got instant power. They will be a boon to developing countries and a valuable mix to the energy scene in developed countries.

Like much of science, "breakthroughs" are often just a point of incremental progress. But it does appear we've reached that point with this technology, and I think it would make a good story.

Interested?

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story:

21 March 2012

Plastics put solar on the verge, again.

Recent gains in the efficiency, lifespan and manufacturing of thin-film plastic solar panels have advocates convinced that, this time, solar really is on the verge of a revolution – even as the market crashes around them.

<http://www.dailyclimate.org/tdc-newsroom/2012/03/plastic-solar>

Pitch (extreme example):

Would you be interested in a story on WSU's dryland research station in eastern WA and how such dryland ag research is becoming more important in this era of extreme drought? With what's happened in the midwest and what's projected to

happen in the Southwest due to climate change. No one has covered this angle as yet according to the center's director who will be back in town late next week. He can tell me more then.

My response:

I like this idea. The story has to be broader than just WSU's research station. If you can recast the pitch to look at the future of dryland farming, and what would trigger a switch to dryland farming in areas such as the midwest and southwest, and what such a switch would look like, I'd be happy to consider this.

I'd need to see a 45-word lede, or nut, paragraph and short list of potential sources you hope to interview.

freelancer's response:

Here's my sample lede paras and outline for the dryland story:

After a summer of some of the worst droughts in more half a century, it's only natural to wonder whether the Midwest will soon become a candidate for dryland agriculture.

The Midwest corn crop has largely been decimated this year due to lack of rainfall and long-term climate projections indicate that the southwest will only become drier.

Land that was once used as prime agricultural acreage may need to be converted into the sort of dryland acreage so prevalent in the semi-arid high deserts of Idaho, New Mexico, Utah, and eastern Washington State.

Washington State University's dryland research station in the eastern part of the state is the driest non-irrigated agricultural research station in the U.S. As such, it has pioneered the cultivation of dryland wheat and camelina in areas that would normally remain fallow.

I would continue with description of what dryland agriculture does.

How it's improving. What can be grown. How we may need to adjust our diets and consumption.

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my response:

For this to work, I need to see some evidence that farmers are moving away from irrigated ag toward dryland. Or at the very least that they're sensing that it is on the horizon and are starting to make plans.

In other words, I would need the story to ground the WSU report in some real-world stats and data on irrigated and dryland ag acreage and recent trends. Ideally, you'd have a farmer or a farm bureau chief pondering a shift from irrigated ag to dryland.

Also, I need to know more about the research, and how it links to dryland ag. Is it just that this research station is studying it? Are they working on ways to increase yields? is there recent research specific to converting from irrigated to dryland ag? Do they have data on whether (or how much) irrigated land/crops in the US could be successfully converted to dryland ag? Somewhat related, but tangential, is the question of whether areas of the west could become too hot even for dryland ag.

But what you have below is too speculative ("projections indicate"; "acreage may need to be") and abstract for us.

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Freelancer's response:

The Ag research community in the U.S. fully accepts that Climate Change is here and is affecting their year-on year farming operations. The consensus is that this summer's cornbelt droughts were not some fluke, but were caused by climate change whatever the root cause, be it fossil fuel emissions or some long term solar irradiance variations.

Therefore, the story would be about how climate change will likely drive many existing dryland farmers out of business in the coming years and could put traditionally rain-fed and irrigation-rich midwestern areas into the dryland farming category. Would they be able to adjust to this change in the midwest or will they have to start farming new crops that require less water? Corn is notorious for its water requirements.

So, in the intermountain west and on the West coast, dryland farming will likely become even more difficult and may disappear and in the midwest and potentially the southeast, dryland farming as practiced in eastern Wa state should get new practitioners due to climate change.

As for Irrigation? It will no longer be the magic bullet that it once was because the aquifers are becoming depleted due to long term drought, so farmers will have to become smarter in using what precip they have naturally; eg., the dryland angle. I might mention what's happening in Canada or Australia in passing, but won't have room to develop how India or Siberia are reacting to all this.

I think this could be an interesting story if you allow for some speculation about what's projected for the next decade or more. A google news check pulls up nothing on this.

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My response:

Thanks for the time spent on the pitch. I'm still not 100 pct sure what your one nut graf is but I'm OK with what you have for now. You still need to find a way to condense this story into one main point. Contract is attached.

(story has not been filed yet)

pitch:

As I'm sure you know, production of algae oil to supplant petroleum has been a topic of interest in the energy field for a few years, with one possible application being directing CO2 emissions from power plants to algal pools to fuel the growth of the algae and capture the carbon.

A project in Montana is using this synergy on a small scale — in a closed loop system that will power a lumber mill while also producing a high-nitrogen organic fertilizer. <http://algaequa.com/AACT/Bioprocessors.html>

The counterculture meets hi-tech in the Algae Aqua-Culture Green Power House being built next to a lumber mill in northwest Montana. Although complying with E.F. Schumacher's Small is Beautiful philosophy, the power house is driven by intelligent systems that talk to each other in order to adapt to changing environmental conditions and workloads. The system burns wood waste and sequesters the emissions in algae bioreactors, which provide nitrogen-rich feedstock to an anaerobic digester; a water-heavy organic fertilizer is produced in the digester, along with methane, which is used to generate electricity; the CO2 from that is again directed to the algae tanks. This computer-driven closed-loop system "uses all of the buffalo," as its developer says. It is also an approach to decentralized power production that could be adapted to work almost anywhere.

My response:

Thanks, but I must decline. The story is indeed intriguing but it's a bit small-scale and a tad premature for us. I'd say once the entrepreneur has more modules up and running and a little more evidence that his business model works, we'd be interested in a story.

Pitch:

A paper just published in Conservation Biology notes that by 2100 there will be a 75 to 100 percent loss of spawning habitat for three species of salmonids in the John Day River, a tributary of the Columbia. The effects will likely wipe out a lot of

Chinook Salmon and Bull Trout by mid-century, all due to warming August temperatures which these species can't tolerate. The authors linked it to climate change.

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Response:

Ignored. No sense of story or sources; no effort to show how this is relevant to readers.

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Pitch:

Geoengineering research starts focusing in on the details

For years, the conversation surrounding geoengineering has focused on the question of "should": Should we actually try and implement planetary-scale experiments with a goal of slowing global warming? Or are the risks too broad and murky? Small-scale experiments have been derailed by patent issues and public outcry, and the research community has generally been extremely cautious in describing approaches and advocating actual use of geoengineering. But recently, the focus has started to shift: increasingly, experts in the field have begun to ask detailed questions of "how" geoengineering would really work.

For example, in a recent issue of Nature Climate Change, a group describes how the specific size of aerosol particles should be considered to optimize the light scattering effects of the stuff once it is up in the stratosphere. The standard idea is to use sulphates like those that are ejected naturally from volcanic eruptions, but such particles are "far from optimal," while mineral-based aerosols could achieve better light scattering with less mass, meaning less expense in terms of getting the particles into the sky.

In another recent paper by in Environmental Research Letters, the costs of specific methods for getting the aerosols airborne are examined. Generally, putting enough sulphate into the sky would be shockingly cheap, in the context of the costs associated with climate change (I covered this in a brief blog post for IEEE Spectrum a few weeks ago); the ideas range from ground-based guns (expensive) to modifying existing aircraft to truck them up high enough (cheap). And an ongoing debate over patents for geoengineering methods suggests that the field is reaching a point where specific technologies are becoming more and more relevant.

I'd like to write a story on some of this new research and on the reasoning behind it and its implications. Is this just a natural progression of a field as it matures, or are scientists increasingly feeling the pressure of rising CO2 levels, temperatures, and sea levels to drill down into the details of geoengineering schemes? And for years, even posing detailed questions of "how" yielded substantial backlash from other scientists and the public -- is that changing, again given an increasing need to

address climate issues immediately? I would aim to speak with experts in the field like David Keith, Nick Pidgeon, Ken Caldeira, and others, and hope to convey how geoengineering research is progressing.

Notably, none of the proposed experiments (like in the UK or New Mexico) have happened yet, though we are undoubtedly getting closer. And there is, thankfully, still much discussion on the "should" side, and even the recent papers looking at details consistently call for emissions reductions as a first priority and for clear discussions of the implications of geoengineering. But with (admittedly somewhat arbitrary) deadlines on averting climate catastrophes approaching rapidly, are scientists working hard to have a method ready if called upon?

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Response:

Ignored. Way too wordy. Where's the story in here? I don't have time to find it.
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Pitch:

In this remote corner of Colombia, where corruption is rampant and armed groups still displace those with legal rights to the land, Cocomasur villagers are looking beyond REDD, hoping carbon credits will generate funding for a network of community-run, environmentally-friendly businesses. But critics fear using carbon markets to build stability in such an unstable region will ultimately benefit armed groups rather than local people and forests.

response:

I have to decline, even though it's an interesting story. Various elements of REDD have been in the news more or less continuously for the past few years; Mongabay has been on this story. And although you have identified an interesting angle, my mandate is to report on topics that aren't seeing much coverage.

pitch:

Paramos are extremely important wetlands that store glacial snow runoff for urban areas of Colombia (and throughout South America), I plan to visit some paramos close to Bogota. There are big concerns about drought and dwindling water supplies in Colombia's paramos. And if the ecology of the cloud forests, which act as important natural water filtration systems, is altered, the combined effect could be even more devastating for urban populations.

Response:

accepted; nice link to human impact, water supplies. Plus good opportunities for on-site, colorful reporting of an unusual, under-reported area & topic. Story still in the works.

pitch (successful):

I would like to write a story for Daily Climate about the security implications of U.S. energy and climate policies, examining the efforts of senior military brass to address climate change within a military context. I'll be meeting with and interviewing Admiral McGinn and Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, the British Climate & Energy Security Envoy, next week. The officials will be in Fort Collins as part of an event with former Colorado governor Bill Ritter, who now directs an energy policy center at Colorado State University. As part of my reporting, I'd also review other recent research on the connection between climate and conflict.

Published:

2 April 2012.

Military sees threats, worry in climate change.

Climate policy may be a minefield in U.S. politics, but the Pentagon sees liabilities of a different kind and is forging ahead with plans to reduce the military's carbon footprint and prepare for climate impacts.

<http://www.dailyclimate>