

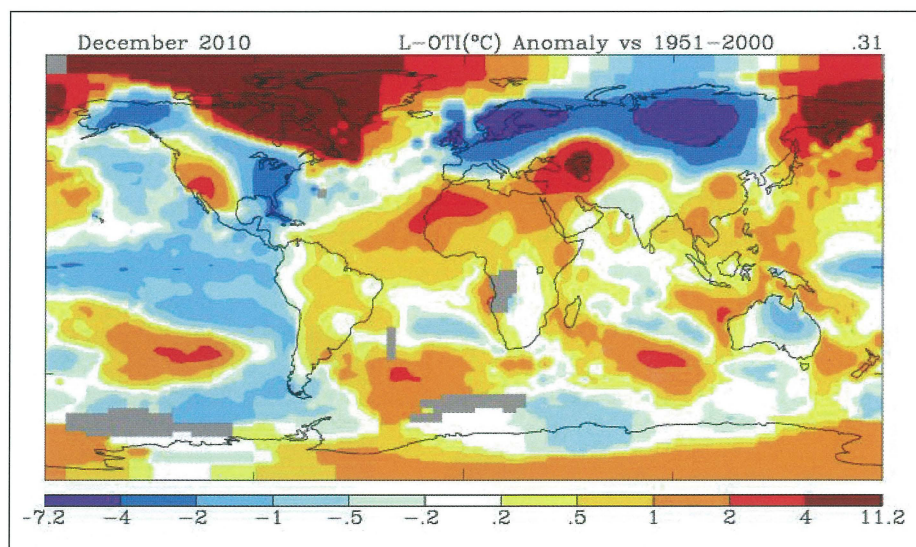
Give Us The Whole Picture

Dr Phillip Playford (*PESA News Resources* Feb/Mar 2011) seeks to shore up his untenable position on climate change by a) discrediting forecasting methods and b) drawing attention to a winter that “has proved to be very severe in the UK and elsewhere in the northern hemisphere.”

The UK Met Office forecast a 20–40% probability that the winter would be similar to or cooler than average winters. The winter did turn out to be cooler than average. 20–40% probability is quite high. If this were the forecast for rain for the day, most of us would take an umbrella. If you figured that someone else’s exploration well had this chance of success you’d almost certainly buy up shares in the relevant company.

Playford’s use of these data in the context he presents reveals a lack of appreciation of probability analysis. It’s surprising coming from a scientist with a long career associated with petroleum exploration where probability analysis is a fact of life.

My understanding of the northern winter is that colder than expected weather in parts



Winter 2010 temperature anomaly compared with 1951 – 2000 average. Some areas were cooler than average (blue) but large areas (yellow-red) were warmer. Figure sourced from NASA data and images website.

was caused by a shift in the pattern, not a general ‘freezing over’. Thus, while much of eastern and northern Europe, together with eastern USA, experienced a colder than average winter, the western USA, eastern Siberia, Canada, Greenland and much of the Arctic were quite a bit warmer than usual – see accompanying graphic.

My family experienced something similar (on a smaller scale) while holidaying in northern Italy during their winter a few years ago. We experienced mild weather, while to the south Sicily and Greece froze. Give us the whole picture next time, Playford.

Andrew Nelson ■