Researchers weigh in on controversial U of A 'beefier barley' billboards

The University of Alberta professor whose research featured on controversial U of A billboards says her research isn't meant to minimize the negative effects of climate change.

Jason Herring | September 30, 2019

The U of A advertisement centered around a 2017 paper by Monireh Faramarzi, an assistant professor in the school’s department of earth and atmospheric sciences. The paper modelled the effects climate change will have on Alberta barley production and found that crop yields in the province would increase through 2064.

The study was funded in part by the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency, a now-defunct arms-length government agency meant to help boost the province’s livestock industry.

“Our intention was not to construe negative or positive impacts of overall climate change. It was really just about the barley,” Faramarzi said. “We’re not denying any climate change.”

The billboards featuring the research were displayed as part of the U of A’s “Truth Matters” campaign and read, “Beefier barley: climate change will boost Alberta’s barley yield with less water, feeding more cattle.”

The U of A says the billboards for the campaign were first posted on Sept. 2. In total, 11 static billboards within the province carried the ad, which also appeared as a rotating ad on digital Pattison billboards.

On Sunday, U of A vice-president of university relations Jacqui Tam resigned from her post after saying she approved the ad.

Greg Goss, the U of A professor who supervised Faramarzi’s study, said the research was misinterpreted, but wouldn’t speculate on where the misunderstanding took place.

“I don’t think it’s up for us to comment on how people misconstrued the study, whether the billboard itself was not proper or the people’s reaction to it was not proper or ill-informed,” he said.

The researchers added that if Alberta has an increased capacity for crop production due to the effects of climate change, it’s important for the province to be ready to meet increased worldwide demand.

“It is our moral responsibility to adapt and prepare for that so that we can help to feed the rest of the world. It has nothing to do with denial of climate change. We are climate change scientists,” Goss said. “We know that many areas in the world are going to have potential for crop losses and losses in production.”

Goss said the research team wasn’t aware of the release or presentation of the billboards.

This isn’t the first time in recent memory that an Alberta university has found itself in hot water after receiving public backlash from ads promoting their research.

In 2018, the University of Calgary removed ads that critics said diminished the role of paramedics. And this March, the U of C removed a billboard after they said they received complaints saying it “echoed language often used to dehumanize transgender people.”

Source: Edmonton Journal