



GLOBAL WARMING FEARS LEAD TO RATIFICATION OF KYOTO PROTOCOL

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In the world's first major attempt to control climate change, the Kyoto Protocol, a pact that sets country-by-country limits on greenhouse gas emissions, will become law on Wednesday with the United States not participating and dozens of countries far from meeting their goals.

A ceremony to mark the start of the Kyoto Protocol will include such speakers as Wangari Maathai, the recipient of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, and in many countries, governments will hold workshops and events to shape future environment-friendly policies.

The Problem of Global Warming

The global average temperature rose about 1 degree Fahrenheit in the 20th century, according to the National Academy of Sciences. Many scientists attribute this rise to man-made emissions such as carbon dioxide, which comes from burning fossil fuels like the oil used in trucks and cars. Gases like carbon dioxide are called greenhouse gases because they trap heat in the planet's atmosphere, raising temperatures like a greenhouse that creates a warm environment for plants to grow, even in the winter.

Other greenhouse gases are methane, which comes from agriculture and waste dumps, and nitrous oxide, the gas that comes from fertilizer use. Three industrial gases, which are used in refrigerators, heat conductors or insulators - hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride - are also considered greenhouse gases.

The rise in the world's temperature could cause storms, droughts and weather-related disasters, according to the Academy of Sciences. Climate shifts may also disrupt farming and change the life patterns of animals and plants.

The Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol grew out of several meetings of world leaders to discuss environmental challenges. An Earth Summit held in 1992 aimed to limit the emissions of greenhouse gases, but its goals were not met. In 1997, governments met in Kyoto to make legal rules to curb emissions.

The protocol forces rich nations to reduce the use of greenhouse gases to 5.2 percent of 1990 levels by 2008-2012. Each country's goal is determined by how much gas they currently emit. For example, Japan's emissions of greenhouse gases under the treaty would need to be cut by 6 percent below 1990 levels. The European Union, composed of 15 countries, would have to reduce emissions by 8 percent. Had the United States participated, its emission total would have dropped by about 7 percent.

Who the Treaty Affects

The treaty was ratified by 140 nations but its restrictions only apply to 35 of them. Many countries in the developing world said that any mandatory limits would prevent them from growing their industry and economies as the other countries had been allowed to do.

As a result, the treaty does not cover developing countries such as China, the second-largest source of greenhouse gases. At its current rate, China will surpass the United States in emissions by 2030.

The United States was skeptical about countries like China not participating. After holding up talks in 1997 to include a carbon-trading program where a country can trade credits for helping developing countries with lowering emissions, the United States pulled out in 2001. The Bush administration said the Kyoto treaty "exempts 80 percent of the world from compliance, and would cause serious harm to the U.S. economy."

The U.S. Response

The United States has tried other methods to combat global warming. Two senators, Joe Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat, and John McCain, an Arizona Republican, reintroduced a bill this month to reduce carbon emission levels.

Some states are taking matters into their own hands. California is trying to place greenhouse gas limits on automakers while nine eastern states are developing a cap-and-trade program requiring large power plants to reduce their carbon emissions.

The Future

Until late last year, the future of the Kyoto Protocol was unclear. For the treaty to be ratified, it needed the backing of at least 55 countries and the support of 55 percent of the nations who produce the most greenhouse gas emissions.

More than 100 nations accepted the treaty, but it did not meet the second condition until Russia joined in November 2004 to push the number of nations representing emissions to 61.6 percent.

For the moment, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Greece, New Zealand and Canada, which have all signed on to the protocol, are far above their emissions targets. Spain and Portugal, for example, are 40.5 percent above 1990 levels. It will be very difficult for them to reach their goals without the help of emissions trading.

Even if some countries do not meet their targeted emission levels by 2012 the Kyoto Protocol has guidelines in place. These countries will have to provide updates on their progress and make larger cuts in a second period starting in 2013.

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