

US MAYORS ABIDE BY KYOTO TREATY

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In an unprecedented move for local officials, over 100 mayors across the country have agreed to abide by the terms of an international environmental treaty that President Bush rejected.

At the U.S. Conference of Mayors in June, 168 mayors from 37 states committed their cities to the Kyoto Protocol, which aims to combat global warming by decreasing the emissions of greenhouse gasses.

The mayors, both Democrats and Republicans, believe that the growing threat of global warming necessitates immediate action. Their decision to meet or beat the conditions of the Kyoto Protocol will require their cities to reduce pollution from cars and power plants to 1990 levels before the year 2012. Since 1990, greenhouse gas emissions have increased by an average of one percent annually.

The Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement to decrease the emissions of carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gasses. So far, 141 countries have ratified the treaty, constituting more than 61 percent of global emissions. The treaty was negotiated in Kyoto, Japan in 1997, but did not go into effect until February 2005. Member nations must reduce their collective emissions of greenhouse gases by 5.2 percent compared to the year 1990.

President Bush chose not to sign the treaty, citing concerns about the accuracy of scientific data on global warming. He said scientists have yet to determine whether temperature increases are the result of human activity or natural causes.

In addition, President Bush said the treaty endangered the U.S. economy by not requiring developing nations, such as China, a country the U.S. considers an economic competitor, to curb its emissions as well.

The administration said it could not support a treaty that "exempts 80 percent of the world from compliance and would cause serious harm to the U.S. economy."

The president's decision to not sign onto the treaty has been extremely controversial abroad because the United States produces 22 percent of the world's greenhouse gasses despite making up only four percent of its total population.

The Mayors' Initiative

The mayors who signed the treaty believe the time has come to confront the issue of global

warming and feel the treaty will not have deleterious effects on the economy.

“The United States inevitably will have to join this effort,” Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels said. “Ultimately we will make it impossible for the federal government to say no. They will both see that it can be done without huge economic disruption and they will see that there’s support throughout the country to do this.”

The mayors have proposed a series of strategies that they can implement on a local level: restoring forests, reducing urban sprawl, developing alternative energy technologies and educating the public. Some energy efficient initiatives are as cheap and simple as carpooling, while others are as costly and complex as the construction of light-rail or monorail lines.

Results?

Nickels has led the campaign for new pollution goals, and his city has led by example. Greenhouse gas emissions fell 60 percent in Seattle between 1990 and 2000, according to city government officials. The city implemented climate-friendly initiatives both large and small, adapting its power utility company into the country’s only zero net greenhouse gas emitter and compensating individual citizens who carpool with cash rewards or the free use of city-owned cars when needed.

Many other cities are now attempting to replicate Seattle’s success.

According to the Climate Group, a British-based consultant, 17 major U.S. cities have lowered their emissions below 1990 levels and saved \$600 million. Similarly, 156 cities reduced their combined greenhouse gas emissions by 23 million tons.

To encourage emission reductions, the city of Chicago created a computerized marketplace for the exchange of emissions credits. Government operations and businesses unable to meet their emissions goals can purchase credits from other marketplace members that have achieved better than expected levels of reduction. The marketplace, known as the Chicago Climate Exchange, currently has more than 100 members.

Potential Problems

Pollution in outlying areas makes it difficult for cities to achieve and sustain reductions in their levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Despite Seattle’s success, for example, experts predict the emission rate in the larger Puget Sound area will increase 20 percent above the 1990 level by 2010.

Also, a new federal energy bill, which President Bush is expected to sign Aug. 8, does not require an overall reduction in gas emissions, but instead asks industries to lower their projected rate of emission increases.

--Compiled by Zach Werner for NewsHour Extra

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