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U.N. climate chief skeptical about global carbon tax

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By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - A top U.N. climate change official voiced doubt on Wednesday about a global tax on carbon, but said national taxes were possible and laws to cap global warming emissions were better for business.

"I personally am skeptical on the notion of global carbon taxes," said Yvo de Boer, who heads the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

International agreement on such a tax would take a long time, de Boer said, and it might take even longer to get the tax proceeds to the United Nations to deal with global warming.

Speaking at a news conference during the first full-scale U.N. meeting dedicated to climate change, de Boer said individual nations, including the Netherlands, have already put environmentally friendly taxes in place.

However, he said national taxes don't offer predictable progress in curbing the human-generated greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, though they may offer predictable revenues.

He favored so-called cap-and-trade laws, which limit carbon emissions and offer a way for those who emit more than the limit to buy carbon credits from those who emit less.

"What the business community is calling for at the moment is long-term certainty, clear emissions caps imposed by governments so that they know what kind of investment decisions they have to make," de Boer said.

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has said climate-warming emissions must be reduced by 50 percent by 2050, but without investment to curb climate change, emissions could rise by 50 percent instead, de Boer said.

\$100 BILLION TO MAKE ENERGY "GREEN"

De Boer said the world would probably invest \$20 trillion over the next 20 to 25 years to meet the energy demand that goes with economic growth. To make these investments "green" would require an additional investment of perhaps \$100 billion a year, he said.

De Boer said he was encouraged by comments at this meeting from developing nations that recognize the need to combat climate change -- which hits the world's poorest countries disproportionately hard -- even as their economies grow.

Typical were comments by Faisal Saleh Hayat, Pakistan's environment minister, who spoke on behalf of the Group of 77 developing nations and China.

"Climate change poses serious risks and challenges particularly to developing countries and therefore demands urgent global action and response," Hayat said at Wednesday's meeting. "The Group of 77 and China see these discussions as an integral part of the wider sustainable development debate."

This week's two-day meeting on climate change was a prelude to a high-level gathering on September 24 on

the same subject. This will be followed by an international meeting in Bali, Indonesia, in December, meant to begin discussions on the future of the fight against climate change.

De Boer, who is responsible for organizing the Bali talks, said one challenge was coming up with a plan that the United States would accept.

The United States did not join the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change and rejects mandatory limits on greenhouse emissions, but President George W. Bush has agreed with other industrialized nations to negotiate a new climate pact to extend and broaden the Kyoto Protocol beyond 2012.

Washington's U.N. envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, told Wednesday's gathering that the United States was committed to stabilizing greenhouse gases, and recognizes "the fundamental connections among the issues of energy security, climate change, and sustainable economic development."

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