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Global Warming Treaty Set to Take Effect

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NEW YORK -- After seven politically painful years, the Kyoto Protocol finally enters into force on Wednesday, reining in industrial emissions of carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse gases" in a first attempt to control climate change.

The global pact negotiated in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, remains a small step, potentially eliminating only one-tenth of a projected 30 percent rise in worldwide emissions between 1990 and 2010. Its supporters already are looking beyond it, toward bigger steps once the agreement expires in 2012.

Progress will be limited without the United States, however. The world's biggest emitter rejects the Kyoto pact and balks at discussing future mandatory cuts. European environment ministers, key Kyoto supporters, say they will step up efforts this year to win Washington over.

"We will continue to pressure hard for all of our international partners to come on board," European environment chief Stavros Dimas said last Wednesday as the European Commission proposed such post-2012 steps as extending emissions reductions to aviation and shipping. The Bush administration believes it is "premature" to plan talks, said Paula Dobriansky, a U.S. undersecretary of state.

Scientific evidence on climate change continues to mount. At a British government-sponsored conference in early February, international experts cited melting mountain glaciers, shrinking Arctic ice and changes in rainfall patterns, among other effects of global warming.

Compared with even a few years ago, "there is greater clarity and reduced uncertainty about the impacts of climate change," the conference committee concluded.

The global average temperature rose about 1 degree Fahrenheit during the 20th century. A broad scientific consensus attributes the rise largely to the accumulation of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and warns of climate disruptions later this century.

The Kyoto Protocol, an adjunct to the 1992 U.N. treaty on climate change, has been ratified by 140 nations, but its binding restrictions apply to only 35 industrialized countries, committed to reducing or limiting output of six gases, chiefly carbon dioxide, a byproduct of burning coal and oil products.

By 2012 the European Union, for example, is to reduce emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels and Japan by 6 percent.

The United States, which envisaged a 7 percent reduction, signed the protocol in 1997, but the U.S. Senate had resolved in advance not to accept it, citing potential damage to the U.S. economy and demanding that such emerging polluters as China and India be covered.

In March 2001, President Bush also cited the "incomplete state of scientific knowledge" in renouncing the agreement, although the U.S. National Academy of Sciences

subsequently endorsed the scientific consensus about the cause of warming.

Because the protocol required ratification by countries accounting for 55 percent of global emissions, the U.S. rejection left it to Russia to keep Kyoto alive. Moscow vacillated for years before finally ratifying it last November, making the pact effective Feb. 16.

Kyoto will require governments to report regularly on compliance, and in some cases the prospects are dim. Spain's emissions, for example, are growing three times faster than allowed.

But "it's too early to conclude that targets will not be met," said the Dutch head of the treaty secretariat, Joke Waller-Hunter. She noted the EU has opted to "burden-share," to commit to a Europe-wide arrangement whereby one nation's shortcomings can be made up elsewhere.

Key to Europe's success will be its 6-week-old emissions trading system, under which governments have allocated carbon dioxide quotas to 12,000 industrial facilities, from power plants to paper factories. Those emitting less gas than allowed can sell unused "carbon credits" to others that overshoot their targets.

The Europeans are expected to raise the issue of deeper post-Kyoto cuts at informal talks this May under the broader, 194-nation U.N. climate treaty.

The European Commission, forwarding recommendations to the EU governing council last Wednesday, noted that a relatively small group -- the EU, United States, Canada, Russia, Japan, China and India -- emits 75 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. It suggested narrower talks on reductions among these governments, parallel to broader treaty talks.

Bush administration reaction was negative. "We believe that it is premature to establish new mechanisms for negotiating future commitments," the State Department's Dobriansky, who oversees climate talks, told The Associated Press. She pointed instead to U.S.-led programs to develop hydrogen and other new energy technologies as a preferred route to greenhouse gas reductions.