

Climate Negotiators Eye 2008 Elections

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NEW YORK -- Delegates flying to Kenya next week for a global conference on climate are watching the turn of U.S. election seasons as much as the rise in temperatures in their effort to cool planetary warming.

Talks to extend the Kyoto Protocol's caps on greenhouse-gas emissions beyond 2012 have been marking time while governments try to draw the Bush administration, which rejects Kyoto, into the process. The Nov. 7 U.S. congressional elections may help their cause, but the diplomat presiding over the talks says 2008 will be the watershed.

"I would imagine it" _ U.S. involvement _ "would take place after the next presidential election," said Michael Zammit Cutajar of Malta.

A European climate campaigner also views it as a matter of time. "A new administration will have a different policy on the matter," said Matthias Duwe of the Belgium-based Climate Action Network Europe.

Prospective presidential candidates, including Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., say federal action is needed to rein in emissions of carbon dioxide and other industrial, automotive and agricultural gases blamed by scientists for global warming.

McCain co-sponsors one Senate proposal to cap U.S. emissions, and a half-dozen similar bills have been introduced in the Senate. Individual states are taking action, meanwhile, led by California, where a month-old law mandates greenhouse-gas reductions expected to cut that state's emissions by 25 percent by 2020.

"There's a huge amount of change going on in Congress at this time, and in the states," said Manik Roy, who monitors Congress for the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a Washington research group.

"The thinking is that John McCain has the inside track at this point to get the Republican nomination, and many people view climate change as McCain's signature issue."

A key player in climate diplomacy, the European Union's environment commissioner Stavros Dimas, sees "a very important development" in changing attitudes among some U.S. businesses. Heavyweight companies _ from Shell Oil to Wal-Mart _ have endorsed mandatory emissions reductions.

But Dimas agreed U.S. mandates may have to await a new U.S. chief executive.

"I cannot understand why President Bush will not do what his successor will most probably do, that is, introduce a U.S. cap for carbon," he said in a telephone interview from Brussels.

"The earlier the United States moves to exercise leadership, together with us, the earlier we shall have beneficial results for the world and the U.S."

In response, a spokeswoman for the White House's Council on Environmental Quality reiterated the position Bush took in rejecting the Kyoto agreement in 2001.

"President Bush is dedicated to advancing technologies and harnessing the power of the markets to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gases and opposes any program that could hurt the economy or simply shift emissions overseas," said Kristen Hellmer.

The U.S. administration says emission caps would damage the energy-intensive U.S. economy, and says it has devoted \$29 billion over five years to research on climate and on clean-energy technology.

"There is no one-size-fits-all approach to climate change," lead U.S. climate negotiator Paula Dobriansky told The Associated Press.

Referring to bilateral deals worked out with China and others, the undersecretary of state said Washington "is committed to collaborative partnerships that advance economic growth and the development and deployment of clean, efficient energy technologies."

The Kyoto Protocol, a 1997 annex to the 189-nation U.N. climate treaty, requires 35 industrialized nations to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by an average 5 percent from 1990 levels by 2012.

At the two-week annual treaty conference, opening Nov. 6 in Nairobi and drawing up to 6,000 participants, the 165 nations that have ratified Kyoto will resume their talks on what regime of quotas and timetables should succeed that agreement after 2012.

On a "second track," meanwhile, all climate treaty nations, including the United States, are more broadly discussing ways to confront global warming. In both forums, a central subject is when and how to control emissions by such fast-industrializing giants as China and India. Cutajar, refereeing the post-2012 talks, said the Nairobi meeting won't produce "numbers," that is, a concrete plan.

The Kyoto countries "won't sign up to a new set of numbers until they see what is happening around them, and that includes not just developing countries, but the United States," he said.

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