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# Price of global warming cuts may stop deal at U.N. meeting

Updated 11/24/2009 1:17 PM | Comment | Recommend

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The coal fueled Fiddlers Ferry power station emits vapor into the night sky in Warrington, United Kingdom. As world leaders prepare to gather for the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December, the resolve of the industrial nations seems to be weakening with President Obama stating that it would be impossible to reach a binding deal at the summit.

How much would you pay to save the world from the threat of global warming? We might find out soon.

"Everything we do is tied to energy and climate," says climate economist Graciela Chichilnisky of Columbia University. "Not just the electric bill – that's a minuscule part of it. Not just the food bill. Everything."

Some Dec. 7-18, representatives of 192 nations are set to meet in Copenhagen at the United Nations Climate Change Conference. It's by far the most significant attempt at changing the course of global warming since world leaders met in 1997 in Japan to craft the Kyoto Protocol, which aimed 37 industrialized nations at cutting emissions of six greenhouse gases (such as the carbon dioxide emitted from burning coal, oil and natural gas, aka fossil fuels) by 5.2% from 1990 levels. It was never ratified by the U.S. Senate and expires in 2012.

But despite predictions that time is running out to corral greenhouse gases, expectations already have been dashed that the Copenhagen sessions will produce a successful replacement for the Kyoto Protocol.

**FORUM: Who should take the bulk of greenhouse gas limits? TELL US: Has the economy changed your global warming concerns?**

One reason: Technologies to cut back carbon dioxide emissions from factories and vehicles that feed the global economy add costs to fuel, food and more, an option that appeals neither to industrial nations struggling with the global economic meltdown or developing nations trying to ramp up economic growth.

President Obama and China's Hu Jintao signaled as much when they spoke Nov. 17. Obama endorsed a "two-step" plan for Copenhagen – agree to emissions limits there and worry about a legal treaty next year – and neither leader stated his limits.

"Copenhagen does not need to come up with the fine print of a climate-change deal," Yvo de Boer, head of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, said Nov. 4 in Barcelona. "But it needs to ensure that the heart of an agreed outcome is functional and the implementation can begin swiftly."

On Tuesday, the European Union urged Washington and Beijing to come to the Copenhagen event with meaningful bids to check their greenhouse gas emissions. It urged the U.S. to be ready to spell out its long-term vision for reducing carbon emissions over the next two decades.

Swedish Environment Minister Andreas Carlgren said the United States should go beyond 2020 to show that it is on a steep and continuous pathway of reductions. "It's important what they will deliver in 2025 or 2030," Carlgren told the Associated Press. "It would play a crucial role if they could deliver such plans."

Australia's opposition leader Tuesday pledged his party's support for contentious legislation proposed by the government aimed at curbing the country's greenhouse gas emissions. Australia is one of the world's worst carbon dioxide polluters per capita because of its heavy reliance on its abundant coal reserves.

## LEADERS VS. GLOBAL WARMING

**USA:** President Barack Obama pledged to "take significant mitigation actions and stand behind these commitments" at Copenhagen. But no hard numbers yet. Congress contemplates 17% to 20% cuts.



**China:** President Hu Jintao pledged "notable" cuts in growth of emissions by 2020. No hard numbers. But China has signed clean energy agreements and has stricter gas-mileage rules than U.S. ones.



**United Nations:** Yves de Boer, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, says industrialized nations need 80% cuts compared to 2005 emissions.

**Maldives:** President Mohamed Nasheed pledges his nation will be "carbon neutral" with effectively zero emissions by 2050, and looks to grow algae to store carbon emissions for climate credits.

**Japan:** Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama pledges a 25% cut compared to 1990 levels by 2020. The campaign pledge revitalized moves toward a world climate agreement in September.



## AREAS OF INTEREST IN COPENHAGEN

**Basics:** The International Energy Agency (IAE) says global energy will grow 40% by 2030. Fossil fuels make 75% of energy today, but some technologies can cut greenhouse emissions.

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**Coal power:** "Clean coal," with carbon dioxide emissions shunted to underground reserves, is crucial to cutting future greenhouse gases, according to the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. A big task, it will add to energy bills and require 50% more pipelines than today's U.S. petroleum industry uses.



**Natural gas:** Natural gas is the lowest impact fossil fuel for greenhouse gases and is the fastest-growing energy source nationwide. Even if Copenhagen produces global greenhouse gas limits, gas use will likely increase, perhaps 17% worldwide by 2030, according to the IAE, because of its low rate of greenhouse emissions.



**Wind power:** The renewable energy source seeing the biggest short-term increase is windpower, with U.S. wind farms increasing their capacity 50%



in 2008, more than 8,500 megawatts. Texas, Iowa, California, Minnesota and Washington lead the nation in wind power, says the American Wind Energy Association.

As the driest continent after Antarctica, it is also considered one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change.

Malcolm Turnbull said his Liberal Party senators and senior lawmakers agreed during a seven-hour meeting to support the Labor Party government's bill in a Senate vote this week.

"I am confident ... the legislation will be passed," Turnbull told reporters.

Many observers feel pressure to act sooner than later. Global temperatures have increased about 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit since 1906, according to the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Without a new treaty to halt carbon dioxide emissions, world temperatures could rise an additional 7.2 degrees by 2100, raising fears of widespread crop failures, climate "refugees," rising seas and desertification for regions such as the Southwest.

Greenhouse gases trap heat and warm the atmosphere. A United Nations Environment Programme report in September found effects such as drought, melting sea ice and ocean acidification arriving ahead of, and looking worse than, the IPCC's 2007 projections.

"Business as usual" leads to an increase of more than 8 degrees, "truly a catastrophic world," says Alden Meyer of the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, D.C. "We've spent two decades putting this off. We won't get a second chance."

Such forecasts, though, met renewed skepticism this week with the disclosure of e-mails stolen from England's University of East Anglia, including climate researchers privately bad-mouthing critics and struggling to explain if global warming is real, why recent years' temperatures didn't exceed 1998 and 2005 levels, the warmest on record. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., says the e-mails show scientists "cooked the science" and has called for an investigation. Climatologist Gavin Schmidt of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, however, said on the *RealClimate* website that the e-mails contain "no evidence of any worldwide conspiracy," just "a peek into how scientists actually interact."

#### Now vs. the future

Still, what is at stake at Copenhagen, Meyer and other observers say, is the world's choice for the future: one where nations hedge now against the foreseeable risks of warming or gamble today that they won't happen tomorrow, and keep on burning coal and oil.

So what would a good Copenhagen deal look like? The United Nations' de Boer says it would hold:

- Greenhouse-gas emission goals for industrialized nations.
- Emission-free energy goals for developing nations.
- Promises of money and machinery from industrialized nations to meet those goals.
- Agreement on how to meet those goals and commitments.

"The issue is not whether you are for or against climate change, but rather how much are you willing to sacrifice to slow climate change," says Yale economist Robert Mendelsohn.

The U.S. Senate is contemplating bills that might lead to a 17% to 20% cut in U.S. emissions by 2020. In June, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the costs of creating a carbon "market" to achieve such cuts would be about \$175 a year by then for the average household. With efficiency measures added, the Environmental Protection Agency says the bill proposal would actually lower energy costs for households but cause huge changes in the energy business – with fossil fuels falling from about 85% of U.S. electricity generation today to 30% by 2050 – costing jobs at coal plants while adding them in solar, wind and nuclear energy.

A flurry of meetings have led up to Copenhagen, starting with the 2007 session in Bali, where the Bush administration committed the nation to taking part in Copenhagen. The road to Copenhagen really started, however, in 1992, when the USA signed on to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, agreeing to keep global warming effects below "dangerous levels."

So what's dangerous? In March, a *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* report updating earlier danger estimates found nothing but negative consequences should global temperatures rise more than 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

The present concentration of carbon dioxide, the biggest player in global warming greenhouse gases, in the atmosphere stands at about 388 parts per million, compared with roughly 270 ppm prior to the Industrial Revolution. At the atmospheric equivalent of 450 ppm concentrations, the world faces a 50% chance of seeing global temperatures rise more than 3.6 degrees.

"The meeting's challenge is to get developed nations on line to economies that are low-carbon, and get developing nations investing in energy technologies that allow them to grow without entering the carbon-emitting trap," says Frances Beinecke, author of *Clean Energy Common Sense: An American Call to Action on Global Climate Change*. "Copenhagen has to send them a signal that we are serious."

In the U.S. Senate, that signal, a clean-energy bill, looks unlikely to pass this year as legislators look at the details, says Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., a sponsor of one leading proposal. The bills all center on creation of a national "cap-and-trade" system, where rights to emit greenhouse gases are capped, and then sold and traded among industries.

Meanwhile, de Boer says, industrialized nations would more likely have to cut emissions about 80% to not cross the 450 ppm danger line. In 2007, the IPCC estimated such a cut would trigger a 3% reduction of the global economy, an impossible proposition amid a global recession, says David Victor of the University of California-San Diego.

"As soon as we put a price on carbon, the increased price will pass all the way down (to consumers)," says Jae Edmonds of the Joint Global Change Research Institute at the University of Maryland. "When I consider my home

heating-oil bill, my natural-gas bill in the winter, the prices will drive decisions."

**A practical approach**

Doing nothing costs, too. In October, for example, a National Research Council panel estimated that burning fossil fuels costs \$120 billion in health expenses nationwide every year, mostly from at least 18,000 premature deaths caused by pollution, with a "middle ground" estimate of climate damages of \$350 billion from storms, drought, wildfire and related effects.

"President Obama was just stating the obvious. There is no use in pretending that a full and final treaty will be ready by Copenhagen," Victor says. Expecting 192 nations to agree on anything realistic, he adds, seems like a bad strategy.

Instead, he suggests the major nations releasing greenhouse gases, particularly China and the United States, cut direct deals to save time.

"I just think that is the most practical approach," he says.

Chichilnisky says this idea won't work, because poor nations will then barrel down the fossil fuel path to industrialization without a global treaty that gives them a reason to invest in low-emission power.

In 2006, a British government report, the "Stern Review," estimated that addressing climate change through efficiency, low-emission technologies and a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gases, among other steps, would subtract about 1% from global Gross Domestic Product in 2050, as opposed to a roughly 5% to 20% cost to global GDP if nothing were done. Mendelsohn and other economists criticized this high cost estimate and its all-or-nothing response to climate change, rather than a step-by-step one.

"People seeking such a stringent policy that ensures global warming will not be harmful will demand such an expensive strategy that no one will agree to do anything," Mendelsohn says. "In contrast, if we sought a moderate policy that will eventually lead to substantial reductions of greenhouse gases, it is very likely one could get global agreement in Copenhagen."

*Contributing: Associated Press*

**READERS: Has the state of the U.S. economy changed your concerns about global warming at all?**

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Posted 11/23/2009 8:56 PM

Updated 11/24/2009 1:17 PM

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