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Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON THE EARTH SUMMIT

Carpe Diem, Congress; the President Won't



We lead in 'greenhouse' carbon-dioxide emissions, which obligates us to negotiate cuts in our fossil-fuel use.

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Four years ago, presidential candidate George Bush remarked: "Those who think we're powerless to do anything about the 'greenhouse effect' are forgetting about the 'White House effect.' As President, I intend to do something about it."

What has the President done to meet his campaign pledge? Worse than nothing. He is personally obstructing an international agreement to limit global warming.

Over the past year, in five rounds of international negotiations on global warming, the United States has repeatedly thwarted progress by opposing any limits on emissions of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas. Now, time is running out. The crucial round of international negotiations begins Monday in Paris. Agreement must be reached before the United Nations Earth Summit convenes June 3 in Rio de Janeiro.

Our allies call for definitive action. The European Community supports a sensible first step—stabilizing carbon dioxide emissions at 1990 levels by the year 2000. Japan, Canada, Australia and many others recognize the potentially catastrophic impacts of global warming and support similar limits. But not the United States, the world's largest greenhouse polluter. While the rest of the industrialized world is ready to act, President Bush equivocates and calls for more studies.

Our position could not be more misguided and dangerous. Since the Industrial Revolution, mankind has altered the Earth's atmosphere dramatically. Carbon dioxide levels are up 25% and increasing 0.5% each year. Atmospheric concentrations of other greenhouse gases are rising even more rapidly. What's more, these changes are virtually irreversible. The carbon dioxide we pump into the atmosphere today remains for more than 100 years, a dangerous legacy to our great-great-grandchildren.

The Administration's policy is to hope that these tremendous atmospheric changes will prove to be harmless. But our best scientists can give us no such assurances. They say that global warming could raise world temperatures to unprecedented levels, threatening coastal flooding, famine, drought, increased spread of tropical diseases and widespread ecological damage.

The possibility of severe and unpredictable impacts cannot be ignored. Scientists anticipated the depletion of

the stratospheric ozone layer, but none forecast the sudden appearance of an immense ozone hole. Similarly, the National Academy of Sciences says that global warming could cause "sudden and major changes in regional climates, ocean currents, or other natural or social phenomena."

Most analyses find that we could readily join the rest of the industrialized world in stabilizing carbon dioxide emissions. In fact, this goal would be easier to achieve in the United States than in most other nations. Carbon dioxide comes primarily from burning fossil fuels. As one of the most energy-inefficient nations in the developed world, our untapped opportunities for energy conservation are vast, enough for us to both achieve stabilization and save money.

Even so, the President continues to oppose all "targets and timetables" for control of carbon dioxide emissions. This ideological resistance isolates the President from other world leaders—and from a growing bipartisan opposition in Congress.

Today's impasse in the climate talks resembles the international negotiations to phase out the production of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons. Two years ago, those negotiations teetered on the brink of collapse because the Administration refused to help fund the efforts of developing countries to reduce CFCs. The House intervened, passing an amendment to the Clean Air Act that directed the Administration to provide the crucial funding. Three weeks later, the Administration reversed its position and an international agreement was reached.

A similar effort is needed now to rescue the negotiations on climate change. In the last two weeks, more than 135 House members from both parties have co-sponsored legislation to require stabilization of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States. Passage of this legislation in May, as an amendment to the House energy bill, would provide the global leadership the country needs.

Suddenly, faced with the prospect of unilateral U.S. action, the Administration would find its calculus changed. Then it would be in the interest of industry—and hence the Administration—to support stabilization requirements in all developed nations.

There is a lot at stake between now and June 3, when the Earth Summit begins. The world may never have a better opportunity to make inroads against global warming. If the President won't seize the day, Congress must.

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