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THE HOT BLOG

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

The UN's Climate of Futility [Patrick J. Michaels]

Climate bureaucrats from 180 countries came together in Bonn, Germany, to craft yet another proposal to replace the UN's failed Kyoto Protocol on global warming. Whatever comes out of the meeting will be up for formal adoption at an even bigger meeting in Copenhagen next December.

Remember Kyoto? It would have required us to reduce our national emissions of carbon dioxide to 7 percent below 1990 levels. Europe, Canada, and pretty much the rest of the developed world had similar "obligations." Kyoto failed because, simply put, it was too costly, both politically and economically. It would have had no detectable effect on global warming, anyway — "preventing" about seven-hundredths of a degree Celsius by 2050. The Earth's surface temperature bounces around about twice that amount naturally from year-to-year, so it would have been impossible to determine Kyoto's "benefit."

What's the response of the U.N. and the Obama administration to this failure? The meeting in Bonn proposes even more drastic cuts in emissions. The legislation currently being discussed in the House of Representatives, and supported by the president, would reduce U.S. emissions to 83 percent below 2005 levels. If implemented, this would allow the average American in 2050 to emit only as much carbon dioxide as the average American emitted in 1867. That target is right in the middle of the range being discussed in Bonn.

No one has any idea how this would be accomplished. The president supports the Waxman-Markey "cap and trade" bill — aptly renamed the Obama Energy Tax in this space, since it would amount to the largest tax increase ever instituted by any government in history. Entities that emit carbon dioxide — power plants, GM (Government Motors), you when you drive your car — will be required to reduce emissions by 83 percent over the next 40 years. Those who can't do this will have to



purchase a permit from someone or something that did.

This will make anything using, produced from, or transported via fossil fuels prohibitively expensive. How costly? The last time gas went up to \$4 a gallon, the nation's consumption dropped by about 4 percent. What does the price have to be to cut it by 83 percent? No one really knows, but it will surely be extremely high.

All this will have minimal effect on global warming. Using standard scientific models (such as they are), we can estimate that, if every nation in the world that has obligations under the current Kyoto Protocol begins to reduce emissions soon and reaches the 83 percent target by 2050, the amount of warming prevented by then is a mere 0.08 degrees Celsius by 2050 and 0.22 degrees by 2100, compared with what the United Nations calls "business-as-usual."

Business not "as usual" won't be very much business at all, at least in the U.S., where the average per capita emissions would have to drop to where they were after the Civil War. In response, businesses will migrate to where cheap energy is available, such as India and China. Both countries have made it quite clear that they simply will not go along with the emissions reductions being talked about in Bonn and Washington. The political pressure to develop their economies is orders of magnitude stronger than any pressure to hinder that development with artificially expensive energy.

Nor are China and India reluctant to exploit the new administration's frequently stated desire to "work with the international community" (read: the U.N.) on climate change. So, Beijing and New Delhi are ratcheting up the stakes even farther. China, for example, may agree "in principle" to some vague reductions in emissions at some future time, but only if the developed nations of the world agree to send a check for 1 percent of their GDP annually as payment.

For all its new internationalist intentions, even the many environmental radicals in the Obama administration will recognize the perils of a policy that would lead to another round of de-industrialization in the U.S. while paying competitors to bury our economy. And they have one escape hatch: the U.S. Senate.

Absent some extreme climatic change, there is no way that the Senate is going to go along with the House or with Obama on the issue of drastic cuts in emissions. Consequently, negotiators in Bonn will say that everything that the U.S. does is contingent upon what the Senate will do.

The smartest policy for the new "internationalist" administration would be to support the massive emissions reductions proposed in the House legislation, and to delay consideration by the Senate until after the Copenhagen meeting, where it is sure to die. Obama can burnish his international environmental credentials, please those within his own administration, and avoid further destruction of the economy.

— Patrick J. Michaels is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of *Climate of Extremes: Global Warming Science They Don't Want You to Know*.

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