

Climate summit: Slippery slopes ahead

Vice President Al Gore last week called the 1992 climate treaty inadequate to combat the threat of greenhouse warming and urged nations to agree on further measures. But when a major climate summit convenes in Berlin next week, the United States and other countries will almost certainly put off setting strict limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

The likely delay reflects widespread disagreement both within the United States and throughout the world on how to address the greenhouse warming problem. Indeed, despite making strong pledges about reducing emissions of heat-trapping gases, the United States and many other industrialized nations now admit they are having trouble meeting even the less stringent goals proposed by the 1992 Earth Summit treaty, signed in Rio de Janeiro.

That agreement, formally known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, requires industrialized countries to aim to return emissions of greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by the year 2000. That target is not binding and does not address the period after the century's close.

The Berlin meeting will be the first conference of the nations that have ratified the Rio treaty — at present, 117 countries plus the European Union. The summit marks their first opportunity to extend and possibly strengthen the treaty's provisions. Germany and several other nations had hoped a strict protocol on emissions reductions would emerge from the Berlin meeting.

In negotiation sessions last year, the United States, the European Union, and other countries admitted that current commitments will fail to meet the climate convention's stated objective — the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system. But negotiators have since showed little resolve for making further commitments.

"We are now looking at a situation in which the maximum response that is politically feasible throughout the world still falls short of what is really needed to address the problem," Gore said in a speech last week at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Oil-producing nations have recently made a show of force, arguing that current emissions goals are sufficient — a position backed by the U.S. petroleum industry and many other business sectors. The main greenhouse pollutant, carbon dioxide, comes from the burning of coal, oil, and natural gas.

During talks in February, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait blocked countries from for-

mally declaring the treaty inadequate. The negotiating body adopted compromise wording, declaring the Rio convention's commitments "a first step."

Instead of pushing for agreement on a binding protocol, the United States and the European Union will ask the Berlin conference to produce a mandate to negotiate a protocol by 1997. A road map for future talks, the mandate could outline specific targets and timetables for emissions cuts, or it could leave such contentious issues unresolved.

Debate will focus on how to include developing countries in a future protocol. The 1992 treaty set emissions goals only for industrialized countries, as they have produced most of the atmospheric buildup of greenhouse gases.

But because emissions are now increasing fastest in developing countries, the United States and other industrialized countries want to bring all nations into a protocol. Developing countries argue that rich nations must take stronger steps before asking poorer ones to accept potential brakes on their growing economies.

"There is this very dicey deal breaker going on between the developed and developing countries, especially with the United States not clarifying its position on this issue," says attorney Liz Barratt-Brown of the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington D.C.

The Berlin conference also will address a controversial issue called joint implementation — an as yet undefined process allowing countries to satisfy emissions targets through agreements with other nations. The developing world fears that this approach would permit rich nations to evade cutting their own emissions by paying poor nations to limit theirs.

Several procedural issues should provide lively debate in Berlin. In recent talks, countries sparred over whether to require voting by consensus. Supported by oil-bloc countries, this arrangement would give more power to individual nations that might disagree with a majority.

Even as they debate emissions limits for the post-2000 period, several countries now face trouble meeting the current goal for the century's end. In their plans submitted to the United Nations last year, Australia, Austria, Canada, Norway, Spain, and Sweden projected their net emissions would climb by 2000. The United States has also announced that its current plan will not meet the emissions goal, but the vice president reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to reach that target.

— R. Monastersky

One roof for much of federal science?

Nearly any industrialized nation you can name has a ministry or commission of science — except the United States. Here, most federal research is scattered across 10 agencies and departments. Jumbled and repetitive as this setup may seem, many scientists say it is one of the country's strengths.

Now, Republicans are floating a proposal to fold much of federal science and technology research into a single department. House Science Committee chairman Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.), who is drafting a bill for the plan, says such a department would cut costs and red tape, improve coordination of research, and eliminate redundancy.

The new department would combine most federal research programs, including the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency, NASA, the U.S. Geological Survey's research, and the Department of Energy's energy research and nuclear weapons laboratories, Walker says. The National Institutes of Health and defense research would be excluded.

Creating such a department could eliminate 5,000 federal jobs, potentially saving \$50,000 or more per position, says a staffer for Walker.

The notion of a cabinet-level science department is not new, nor has it been touted only by Republicans. Various administrations and congresses have battled the idea around at least as far back as Vice President Hubert Humphrey's day, notes Albert H. Teich of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Proponents say such a department could give the scientific community a stronger voice in influencing science policy. But Teich and other critics argue that the plan would destroy a unique aspect of American science: that a scientist can usually find support for a good idea, even if the first agency he or she talks to isn't interested in the research. Putting most science under one cabinet official could also make federal research more vulnerable to budget cuts and to politics, some say.

"You can always think of somebody who, if they became czar of science, it would be disastrous," says Yale physicist D. Allan Bromley, White House science adviser in the Bush administration.

Walker sponsored a similar bill in the last Congress, but it wasn't passed. This time, the plan may have a better shot. It fits Republican goals to eliminate four departments, including Commerce and Energy. Despite its drawbacks, a science department could provide a "life preserver" for the research arms of these departments, Teich observes.

— J. Kaiser