

U.S. Bites Greenhouse Bullet and Gags

The United States has begun taking greenhouse warming seriously but still sees no need for action

Chantilly, Virginia—DELEGATES FROM MORE than 100 countries who gathered here for the first meeting of the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change got what they came for: They agreed on their organizational structure for negotiating how to reduce global warming (see box). But as they look toward further negotiations, they see an uncertain future, partly because of the United States' continuing resistance to taking action to cut its own emissions of greenhouse gases.

That does not mean that the U.S. attitude is totally unchanged. Indeed, government officials greeted delegates with the welcome news that the United States now views greenhouse warming as a serious threat. That's quite a concession from a country that has played down the danger from increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. But then disappointment set in as the delegates learned that the fundamental U.S. policy has not budged: There are no plans to reduce greenhouse gases other than those already in place

for reasons unrelated to global warming.

Critics of U.S. greenhouse policy see a villain—John Sununu, White House Chief of Staff. An engineer with experience in fluid dynamics, Sununu has taken a personal interest in climate change. It is commonly believed among environmentalists, says Michael Oppenheimer of the Environmental Defense Fund in New York, that Sununu is unconvinced by the scientific evidence supporting substantial greenhouse warming. And his misgivings about the science dovetail with the Administration's stated concerns that the economic costs of moderating the greenhouse might be excessive. Add in a good measure of free market ideology, say observers such as Daniel Becker of the Sierra Club, and U.S. policy remains foursquare against any action now.

The attitude taken by the United States left it in a small minority of the meeting participants. Led by the Europeans and others, many countries think that the negotiations that they have begun should lead in short order to promises of substantial reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide, the

major greenhouse gas. Already, more than two dozen developed countries have independently pledged to place controls on carbon dioxide emissions.

At first, the latest U.S. response to the greenhouse threat, announced on the opening day of the meeting, sounded promising. Michael Deland, chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, said, "We are united in the belief that despite large uncertainties the potential threat of climate change justifies taking action now." And the Administration's strategy for tackling the problem, embodied in a new report on its "comprehensive approach," was received as being refreshingly rational and scientific.

That the Administration now believes climate change merits serious attention pleased many of its critics—until they learned what "action now" means to the Administration. While the U.S. pledged to stabilize total greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2000, the Administration aims to do that by decreasing emissions of chlorofluorocarbons, which are also greenhouse gases. Those reductions are already promised in a treaty to halt the destruction of stratospheric ozone; there would be no controls on carbon dioxide for the specific purpose of moderating the greenhouse. Indeed, carbon dioxide emissions would go up by 15%.

The fact that the Administration is at last willing to acknowledge the greenhouse problem is a step in the right direction, says Oppenheimer. And there's nothing inherently wrong with its comprehensive approach, he concedes, "but you're not going to even start to solve this problem without tackling carbon dioxide."

After draft copies of the Administration's National Energy Strategy Act were leaked to the media, the Administration's reluctance to take on carbon dioxide seemed all too clear to environmentalists. The leaked strategy emphasizes increasing energy production, while almost ignoring the possibility of decreasing demand through more regulation and higher taxes, which are anathema to the Administration.

But despite concerns about the U.S. commitment to reducing greenhouse gases, everyone seemed satisfied with the guidelines worked out for the negotiations. The Europeans got language they sought mandating discussion of "commitments, beyond those required by existing agreements, for limiting and reducing net emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases..." while U.S. delegates were pleased that the qualifier "appropriate" was attached to those commitments. Just what, if anything, the United States will find appropriate will be at the heart of the debate for the next few years.

■ RICHARD A. KERR

Bumpy Road to a Climate Treaty

Disputes among the industrialized countries are not the only potential roadblocks to a greenhouse treaty. Developing countries have their concerns, too, as witnessed by a last-minute contretemps at the first meeting of the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Climate Change.

The delegates did manage to achieve their primary goal—organizing themselves into an acceptable committee structure for further negotiations. But at the eleventh hour, even this modest agreement was endangered when Third World participants threw a monkey wrench into the works. Who, they wanted to know, will help pay for cutting back greenhouse gas emissions in their countries? Environmental negotiations have snagged on such a question before. Last June, as the Montreal Protocol on the control of gases that destroy stratospheric ozone was being renegotiated, developing nations insisted that developed countries foot a substantial part of the bill for transferring the needed technology. It was only fair, developing countries argued, that much of the cost should be borne by the countries that not only created most of the problem but have the resources to do something about it.

In the case of ozone, U.S. delegates finally gave in to the idea of a fund for developing countries—but only with the caveat, imposed by the White House, that the decision not set a precedent. But then, in the middle of the last night of the negotiations on climate change, developing nations, led by India, tried to make the ozone decision a precedent anyway. Turmoil prevailed for 18 hours until India finally relented at the last possible second, agreeing to put the question off to later negotiations. Although the crisis passed, no one thinks it will be the last one in the climate arena that is prompted by friction between the developed and developing nations.

■ R.A.K.