

Global Green USA & Green Cross International

Policy Report

Confronting Climate Change: Averting a Global Environmental Crisis

The Reality and Impacts of Climate Change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and a panel of the US National Academy of Sciences (commissioned by George Bush) are agreed on three main points: 1) the earth is warming; 2) human activity is largely to blame; and 3) the warming trend is likely to accelerate in the years ahead. The implications are profound and will affect fundamental human survival needs ranging from food security to a reliable water supply to the loss of land to rising oceans.

Global Green USA, the US affiliate of Green Cross International, held their 4th Annual Sustainability Symposium, "Confronting Climate Change: Averting a Global Crisis" in March 2002 to discuss current solutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change. A panel of business leaders, environmentalists and scientists covered a range of topics from the Bush Administration's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, to what companies and municipalities can do to stem climate change, and the future of working to stop global climate change. GCI President Gorbachev closed the symposium by speaking about what he sees as the most pressing environmental problems and needs and he urged the leadership of the United States, Russia, and China to address the global problem of climate change. The reality is the effects of climate change are already being felt on several fronts:

- U.S. freshwater stocks are low. Global warming, which has been blamed for increased evaporation rates of surface water and the smaller mountain snowpacks that feed major rivers like the Colorado and the Columbia, is cited by many scientists as the biggest single culprit in some of the emerging water shortages.

- The insurance industry has experienced tremendous losses. "The number of really big weather disasters has increased four-fold if we compare the last decade to the 1960s," Munich Re's Thomas Loster said. "The economic losses have leaped seven-fold and the insured losses are 11 times greater."

- Ice caps and glaciers are melting. Mount Kilimanjaro has lost 75% of its ice cap since 1912. The ice on Africa's tallest peak could vanish entirely within 15 years. The Northwest Passage is about to lose its grim, impassable reputation thanks to global warming. Massive ice floes that have blocked all attempts to establish Arctic trade routes between the East and the West are now disappearing so quickly that the passage is expected to open up within a few years.

- Island nations are disappearing as sea levels rise. Tuvalu, an island a few hundred miles northwest of American Samoa, is developing concrete emigration plans to evacuate its islands in this century, migrating its population of 11,000 to "host countries" like New

Zealand. Due to climate change, rising ocean levels are putting Tuvalu and other low-lying island countries at risk of being completely submerged.

In his symposium speech, President Gorbachev highlighted the link between social instability and environmental degradation:

"If we do not address the root causes of poverty, we are bound to see new sources of tension. We are bound to see new sources that will provide fuel to extremism and to terrorists. If the droughts continue, if climate change continues and the food resources of the world are further undermined, while even today more than a billion people are hungry, if these conditions continue and deteriorate, we will see a situation that will be even worse."

In the future, climate change could cause super-saturated hurricanes like Mitch and Floyd to become more commonplace. Floods, drought and the spread of infectious diseases—like malaria—into new regions will put food, water, and public health resources under severe stress. Much of the world's forests will die off from the stresses of drought, disease and insect attacks.

Global warming could spark regional conflicts as large numbers of environmental refugees are driven from their homes. The rapid rate of global warming puts one-third of the world's forests at risk, as well as the species that depend on forests for their survival. While it is possible that the impacts will be less severe than expected, it is equally possible that the effects will not be linear, and that there will be serious and negative climate surprises, such as a dramatic shift in the Gulf Stream current that warms Western Europe.

Averting a Global Environmental Crisis

The world is coming to the table around the Kyoto Protocol in order to take an important step forward in stemming climate change. In the U.S., Bush still claims, despite the report he commissioned, that the uncertainty is too great to act beyond voluntary incentives. He stands alone in the world (with the exception of Australia, who remains committed to adopting Kyoto despite recent support of the 'Bush plan'). The Netherlands ratified Kyoto in April, the EU member states at the end of May, and Japan at the beginning of June. Australia, Canada, and Russia are the nations remaining to ratify – it is hoped that the Kyoto Protocol will come into force during the WSSD in Johannesburg.

President Gorbachev expressed disappointment in the Bush Administration's abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol and urged the Administration to reconsider its position, saying, "I think this is an area where the United States could be a leader and where U.S. leadership could be very important for the world. And I think that the first step should be to recognize the Kyoto Protocol. Whether or not the Kyoto Protocol is ratified I believe we should act in accordance with its guidelines." Gorbachev emphasized that the industrialized nations who are responsible for the majority of

greenhouse gas emissions should bear the most responsibility in reducing emissions and fighting the trend of global warming.

President Gorbachev identified ratification of the Kyoto Protocol as a high priority in preparing for Earth Summit 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa:

"We need to work to prepare for that conference and the International Green Cross is actively involved in that process. It is the view of Green Cross International that the number one priority in preparing for the Johannesburg Conference is to make sure that the Kyoto Protocol is ratified, because I believe that without ratification of the Kyoto Protocol this whole thing will be a scandal. I think if it is not done, this will undermine the very purpose of the Johannesburg meeting."

Beyond the larger policy issues, President Gorbachev discussed the various roles of business and individuals:

"We believe that a very important test for Green Cross International today is to increase the environmental role and the environmental awareness of the business community because the role of business in every aspect of life is very important and it should also be important in protecting the environment. He also spoke of the responsibility of individuals. 'I think our policy makers today need our support, but at the same time they need what I call some democratic pressure so that they address the problems that are of such vital importance to all of us.' He continued, 'I think that when it's a matter of the environment, when it's a matter of the conditions in which we live, we have to act firmly.'"

Conclusion and Recommendations

What should be done? According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, humanity must reduce carbon emissions by about 70% to stabilize the climate.

Therefore, the answer is a rapid switch from oil and coal to renewable energy sources.

Local and state action in the US have provided important leadership while the US federal government has failed to adopt increased CAFÉ standards and ratify the Kyoto Protocol. In the State of California where Global Green USA is headquartered, we can see several examples of leadership, including: the LA Community College District's green building and renewable energy policy that will ensure that their over \$1 billion in new construction use less energy and resources; the City of LA Sustainable Building policy that will 'green' their future \$1 billion in new construction; the City of San Francisco's \$100 million solar bond initiative; and recent State of California legislation which will reduce greenhouse gas emissions of automobiles in California.

These are important successes, but we can go further to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. Global Green USA has called for further leadership in California through a Renewable Portfolio Standard of 20% for California, selling the City of LA's share of a

coal power plant to purchase \$100 million in solar PV for municipal buildings, and putting solar PV on the roof of every school. Similar actions should be taken by local and regional governments in all developed countries.

However, we can not only rely on local and regional leadership. We need national governments to act. In particular, Global Green USA and Green Cross International President Gorbachev call for:

- Countries around the world must show leadership by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol before the Johannesburg Earth Summit. This would be an important first step, and is essential to the success of Johannesburg. Additional negotiations should begin soon after Kyoto is ratified to discuss the further reduction of emissions. **We need Russia to ratify the Protocol now.** President Gorbachev has written to Russian President Vladimir Putin, urging him to advocate for the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol before or during the Earth Summit.

- The US should commit to making parallel binding commitments to the Kyoto Protocol for reducing carbon emissions. This would allow US businesses to more readily participate in plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

- The U.S. and other Western governments must make significant investments in renewable energy solutions in both developed and developing countries by redirecting government energy subsidies away from fossil fuels to encourage the aggressive development of wind, solar, and hydrogen energy sources.

- **We need to create a Solar Venture Fund that will spend fifty billion dollars or five billion dollars annually over the next ten years for purchasing, manufacturing and development of PV.** Use investment from the developed economies to bring the cost of PV down, educate the developing world about appropriate PV technologies, and develop markets to make solar energy an option for all the world's citizens. The US should provide 25% of the fund as the country uses 25% of the world's energy resources. ([for more information on the fund, see the Solar Venture Fund brief](#)).