



July 10, 2009

## World Leaders Agree On Climate Measures

President Barack Obama and the leaders of the Group of Eight nations (G-8) reached an agreement Wednesday in L'Aquila, Italy on goals for cutting greenhouse gas emissions and limiting global temperature increases. The core agreement includes goals of holding global temperatures to an increase of no more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2020 and achieving the long range target of cutting greenhouse gases by 50% worldwide by 2050 through an 80% emissions reduction by the G-8 member nations (which includes the U.S.). Interestingly, the G-8 failed to reach agreement on short-term goals.

As expected, when the leaders of China, India and other developing countries joined the G-8 countries for a larger meeting on Thursday the issue of emission cuts was not addressed. It sounds like the G-8 countries are facing the same situation as the signers of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, when China and India also refused to be a part of the agreement. Fortunately the United States did not sign onto that agreement for that very reason.

Previously the United States did not agree to emission cuts because of the tremendous damage this would have caused our economy. Apparently, in the middle of the worst economy since the Depression, that concern is now overshadowed by global warming fears; despite the fact that global temperatures have not gone up in the last decade and have even shown somewhat of a downward tendency in the last two years.

While the goals of cutting greenhouse gas emissions and limiting global temperature increases make for good sound bites, there are very important considerations being overlooked. In regards to limiting global temperature increases, isn't there something a little pompous about the idea that man can simply control the Earth's climates? Second, if we assume that reducing carbon dioxide emissions will have a cooling effect on the Earth's climates, are we also assuming that there are no other, possibly stronger influences on the Earth's temperatures?

The Earth's climates have warmed in the last 150 years, and no one knows for sure exactly why. But assigning that warming entirely to greenhouse gas emissions raises major questions. First of all, that warming has been uneven. In the United States temperatures warmed from the early 1900s until the late 1930s, and then began cooling until the late 1970s, when temperatures again began warming. Much of the warming that has taken place in the United States since the late 70s

was simply reversing the cooling trend that began in 1940, so overall there has been no real temperature increase in the United States since the late 1930s.

It is interesting to note that it is estimated that 80% of all carbon dioxide released by human activities entered the atmosphere *after* 1940, a time in which there has been no net warming in the United States. So to assume global temperature increases can be stopped by human intervention requires a leap of faith and ignores Earth's varied climate history, which is not entirely understood.

As for the emission reduction goals, there are two problems: One is that if all emitters of carbon dioxide (including China and India) are not on board, the "cuts" will amount to no more than a slowing of the increases. Second, even if the warming of the Earth's climates is related to human activity, it may not be entirely due to emissions. What if it turns out that the increase in carbon dioxide levels are due more to eliminating the "sinks" for greenhouse gases, like cutting down the tropical rain forests, rather than simply emissions increases? There have been incredible changes in land use world wide since 1900. Cities have grown, forests have been cut and agriculture has expanded.

Finally, there is the issue of how emission reduction goals will actually be achieved. We heard part of this answer two weeks ago when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the "cap and tax" bill. If this legislation passes the Senate, we will be paying in the form of higher prices for energy and for any product that uses energy in its production or results in the release of greenhouse gases. And for all the cost, there will be no guarantee that greenhouse gas emissions will actually decrease and no guarantee that global temperatures will not rise. Lastly, there's the possibility temperatures wouldn't have risen anyway, as they haven't gone up in the last decade.

The leaders of the G-8 countries are discussing very important issues, such as the state of the world economy and threats to world peace. The topic of threats to the world's climates should be left to scientists. Considering the increasing amount of disagreement in the scientific community over whether global warming is even a credible threat, it's difficult to see how politicians can come to any reasonable or beneficial agreement.

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