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The Turbulent Lima Climate Talks: Voluntarism Won't Save the Climate

Posted: 01/12/2015 12:52 pm EST | Updated: 03/14/2015 5:59 am EDT

Berkeley, CA -- January 9, 2015. The turbulent UN global climate talks that ended last December 14th in Lima, Peru without setting firm global GHG emissions limitations left the future of the world's climate in limbo.

In a sensible world, those talks should have established a mandatory global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) cap and an enforceable system for allocating emission quotas to each nation.

Under such a program, the total global annual emissions ceiling would be gradually lowered and the allowable national GHG emissions would thus steadily shrink so that global emissions would be constrained to tolerable if not safe levels.

Fractious Talks

Unfortunately, the meeting was so contentious it dragged on for two extra days and no agreement was reached until the penultimate final hour, by which time some of the weary, frustrated delegates had already left.

The final accord included no global emissions limit, no individual national emissions quotas, and no enforcement mechanisms. Its main but noteworthy accomplishment was getting all nations to accept the basic necessity of limiting their greenhouse gas emissions.

However, each nation is now going to determine what its own emission reduction goals will be and when it will meet them. The UN will collect these individual pledges and will use them in preparing for the 2015 Paris climate summit at which a global climate agreement is to be signed, to go into effect in 2020. No one knows, however, what will emerge from Paris.

Although the Lima accord represents important progress and many subsidiary issues were resolved, critical questions still remain about how wealth will be transferred from developed to developing countries to help them cope with the costs of adapting to climate change and converting their economies from dependence on fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy.

A Global Emissions Cap is Needed

That is crucial to their being able to meet their commitments to reduce their emissions. But without an enforceable mandatory agreement instead of voluntary pledges, the outlook for saving the climate is poor. Voluntary pledges are a form of free market climate anarchy, not a coordinated strategy to avert impending disaster.

Climate scientists who specialize in aggregating these voluntary pledges have repeatedly confirmed that the pledges put forward so far are not going to keep the planet from drastic overheating.

Meanwhile, global GHG emissions are rising ever more rapidly today, and carbon dioxide concentrations are already at their highest levels in millions of years, far above any ever encountered in human history.

The atmosphere's capacity to safely absorb additional emissions is well-nigh exhausted. Moreover, a significant portion of these emissions remain in the atmosphere for thousands of years.

The oceans, too, are overloaded with GHG emissions absorbed from the air. They are warming, increasing in acidity, and plankton abundance at the base of the ocean food web is decreasing.

We no longer have the luxury of leaving the fate of the climate to the vicissitudes of national politics and vagaries of economic conditions in the 196 disparate nations of the world.

Climate negotiators in relief that the Lima talks were not a complete debacle tried to put a happy face on the brief final accord achieved. But world leaders now need to speak out forthrightly and call for a mandatory global emission ceiling and national emission quotas consistent with what the best science tells us is needed to avoid exceeding critical climate thresholds.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Dr. Wil Burns for useful input on this topic.

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