



Daily Climate News and Analysis



State Department Predicting Increase for U.S. Emissions Through 2020

Report to U.N. says rise in HFCs behind 4 percent emissions increase; conclusions draw ire from advocates

By Dave Levitan
June 4, 2010

At a time when it is widely believed that planet-warming emissions must quickly get on a downward trajectory, the U.S. State Department projects the nation will see a four percent leap in heat-trapping gases in the period between 2005 and 2020.

In its fifth climate action report to the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the State Department details the substantial rise in emissions that occurred between 1990 and 2007, and projects a greenhouse gas future that many environmentalists are calling "unacceptable."

"The main thing this [report] indicates is that there is clearly a disconnect between what they are doing and what the science tells us what we need to do urgently," said Rose Braz, the climate campaign coordinator at the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Az.-based conservation group.

"We would hoped to have seen something saying what the science requires — which is that we need to get CO2 down to 350 parts per million — and a plan about how we are going to do that using existing regulatory programs."

The rise in emissions by 2020 will be largely due to the increase in an often forgotten class of "super" greenhouse gases, known as hydrofluorocarbons, or HFCs, the report says. These gases, used as refrigerants in appliances and elsewhere as replacements for the ozone-depleting substances like chlorofluorocarbons, can be more than 1,000 times as potent as carbon dioxide.

HFCs to More Than Double by 2020

The report's projection of a four percent increase incorporates carbon-reducing policies that were already in place as of March 31, 2009, including last year's stimulus projects under the American Clean Energy and Security Act, as well as the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007.

Under the State Department's scenario, the U.S. will see a rise from 7,109 teragrams of CO2-equivalents emitted in 2005 to 7,416 teragrams in 2020.

Notably, the country's gross domestic product is predicted to rise 40 percent in that period.

Carbon dioxide emissions, though, will increase only 1.5 percent. Other major greenhouse gases — methane, nitrous oxide and perfluorocarbon emissions — will rise more rapidly, at eight percent, five percent and four percent, respectively.

Although climate action proponents would like to see those numbers drop dramatically, their biggest concern is with HFCs, which are slated to more than double from 2005 and 2020.

For Samuel LaBudde, a director at the non-governmental Environmental Investigation Agency, the report may finally shine a national spotlight on the importance of reducing super greenhouse gases.

"I think it is fair to say that there is probably going to be an increase in the perception that HFCs need to be dealt with," he said. "If people had a better sense of the magnitude and gravity of consequences associated with global warming that if we were really aware we would see a 4 percent rise by 2020 as completely unacceptable."

Policy Changes Could Help

The report did note that additional measures not yet in place — like the American Clean Energy and Security Act that passed the U.S. House last June, or the recently released Senate bill, the American Power Act — could result in dramatic changes to these projections.

Braz said the State Department ignored the fact that these existing policy measures could be used to shrink the nation's carbon footprint.

"I think the report had a little bit of the 'whatever will be will be' outlook, and unfortunately really did not take the opportunity to say, 'Here are all the things we could do under existing measures like the Clean Air Act to cut emissions,'" she said.

The EPA will begin regulating large emitters of greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act in 2011, unless a pending resolution by Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) is passed.

As for HFCs, LaBudde said the Montreal Protocol — which was created to stop the release of ozone-depleting substances into the atmosphere and has generally functioned as planned — represents a cheap and relatively easy way to phase out their use.

Under proposals that may be voted on at the next Montreal Protocol meeting in Uganda in November, a \$4 billion investment could potentially result in a reduction in emissions of 125 to 210 gigatons of CO₂-equivalents by 2050. This is equivalent to between three and six full years of all the world's fossil fuel-related emissions, LaBudde said.

"That equates to buying a lot of time to deal with the other things like CO₂," he said. "This is the biggest low-hanging fruit available for achieving immediate and significant climate mitigation."

Still, there are some major opponents to rapid movement on an HFC phase-out, including industries involved with their use and developing nations, such as India and China. According to LaBudde, though, pressure from the U.S. and Europe would most likely allow for the Montreal Protocol-based approach to proceed.

If such progress happens, it would cut a big chunk out of the State Department's four percent projection.

Braz said that all approaches — from the Clean Air Act to strong legislation — are needed to prevent such a scenario from coming true.

"The entire report should be a wake-up call to the fact that if we don't do more, we are not going to be doing enough," she said.

"I think one of the most frustrating things is that we know what to do to solve this crisis, but what this report indicates is that we're not doing those things enough and we're not doing them quickly enough."