

National Journal

Tuesday, December 14, 2010



Cancun Insider

FRESH TAKES FROM EXPERTS AND REPORTERS AT THE CANCUN CLIMATE-CHANGE SUMMIT

The Elephant in the Room

By Kassie Siegel

Director, Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute

The international climate talks have closed in Cancún, but without making substantial progress on the central issue of establishing science-based greenhouse pollution reduction targets. The enormous gap between the cuts required by science and the pledges made in Copenhagen was the elephant in the room throughout the Cancún talks. Tragically, it appears that this elephant will travel to Durban for the 2011 talks, as the conference failed to adequately acknowledge the gap, let alone establish a concrete process to close it. The current pledges will lead to warming of more than 3.5 degrees Celsius, or 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit -- a truly horrifying prospect.

The gap between the greenhouse pollution reductions needed to keep warming below 2 degrees C (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), the stated goal of the Copenhagen accord, and the Copenhagen pledges, is between five and nine gigatons of carbon dioxide. For comparison, the annual emissions of all the world's cars, trucks and buses is about five gigatons;

annual U.S. emissions are about 7 gigatons. Negotiators failed to adopt any of the solutions under consideration in Cancún to close the gap. Solutions included closing existing loopholes such as the potential use of surplus emission credits from the European Union emission-trading scheme, closing the "logging loophole," which would allow emissions from deforestation to increase without being counted, and simply increasing the pollution reduction targets.

While the decision "recognizes the need to consider" strengthening the cuts and lowering the temperature target to below 1.5° C (2.7° F), the review process established would not conclude until 2015, by which time it may not be possible to achieve this lower target. With clear scientific advice that global emissions must peak in the next five years to preserve our ability to avoid extreme and widespread damage from climate change, enshrining grossly inadequate greenhouse pollution reduction targets through 2015 is simply unacceptable.

The key to unlocking progress in this and many other areas of the talks lies with the United States, which is the world's largest cumulative emitter yet the only indus-

trialized country in the world to refuse to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and has long slowed progress in the negotiations. In Cancun, the Obama administration refused to offer the pollution reductions so clearly demanded by the science, while making strident demands of developing countries and making virtually no concessions itself.

The irony of the administration's continued intransigence is that the United States already has the strongest domestic environmental laws in the world, including the Clean Air Act, through which the Environmental Protection Agency can effectively achieve deep and rapid greenhouse pollution reductions. As the climate negotiations entered their final hours, the U.S. District Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia denied a request by the nation's largest polluters and some states to put the EPA's modest greenhouse pollution regulations on hold, finding that emitters and their state allies had not adequately shown "harm" resulting from the rules.

President Obama has the tools to act boldly and quickly. There are no further excuses for the president's failure to lead the way forward on the most important issue humanity has ever faced.