

History of the Climate Regime

Oh, climate change. Being the climate geeks we are we could write pages on the subject. However, considering you're visiting this page, you are probably just interested in the basics. So in our best ode to Reader's Digest Magazine, here we go....

During the 1950s/1960s the scientific community became concerned about the possibility of climate change. But considering how sociable scientists are, it took a while before it hit the mainstream (ok make that the policy mainstream). In 1988 Toronto hosted the Conference on the Changing Atmosphere, instrumental in establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP). The IPCC is an amalgamation of the leading experts on climate change from around the world. In 1990 they published their first assessment report. The policy world (i.e. governments) decided that something needed to be done to address climate change, so negotiations on an international convention began in earnest in 1991.

At the Earth Summit in 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed. The ultimate objection of this Convention is to prevent dangerous climate change (Article 2). Industrialized countries agreed to stabilize their greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels by 2000; however this wasn't a binding target. Thus as in the case where a teacher gives you an assign with no deadline, it didn't happen.

By 1995 it was obvious that more needed to be done to adequately address climate change. So countries agreed to start negotiations on a Protocol (note the trend to agree to talk about agreeing on something – we will come back to this). These talks culminated in the Kyoto Protocol agreed in Kyoto, Japan in 1997. As part of the checks and balances of international negotiations, any agreements signed by a country at the international level must be ratified by that nation's government at home. Enough countries, representing enough of the industrialized country emissions, ratified the Kyoto Protocol so that it finally came into force (i.e. became legally binding) on February 16, 2005 (yeah!).

The Kyoto Protocol stipulates industrialized countries must, on the whole, reduce their emissions by 5.2% below 1990 levels (though countries may have different individual targets – Canada's is 6%). These reductions must be done between 2008-2012; this period is referred to as the first commitment period.

The Bali meeting is crucial as governments must agree to begin negotiating the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. It took two years to negotiate Kyoto (and 8 years to ratify it). If negotiations begin in Bali, they would need to conclude in 2009 to ensure countries have enough time to ratify before 2012 to ensure that there is no gap between commitment periods. Industrialized countries began talking about their possible future commitments in Montreal in 2005, but we need to speed up the process!

Kyoto is only the first small step towards action on climate change at the international level. The longer we wait to take meaningful action (emissions reductions of 60-80%), the harder it will be to avoid dangerous climate change.