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June 26, 2009, 2:23 pm

The Climate Bill in Climate Context

By [Andrew C. Revkin](#)



Marilynn K. Yee/ The New

York Times If the climate bill becomes law, will it ever meaningfully affect the atmosphere?

[**UPDATE**, 8:30 pm: In a political triumph for Democratic leaders, the House narrowly passed the [American Clean Energy and Security Act](#) this evening. [John Broder's news story](#) has the details and [Twitter](#) has the reaction. The next step is the Senate, with a tougher fight anticipated. As I wrote earlier today, when the final push for votes was under way, it's important to step back just a little and explore what this bill, even at its best, could accomplish.]

Even if the bill [cheaper than Republican foes assert](#), even if provisions [added to satisfy particular constituencies](#) don't blunt its impact on emissions, as [some worry](#), even if the Senate moves and President Obama signs a climate bill into law, will it matter to the climate?

Some longtime opponents of regulatory approaches to climate run the numbers and show the [scant impact of the bill in isolation](#). [Supporters of the bill](#) readily acknowledge that American action in isolation would be insufficient. But they say [our action would galvanize the globe](#), including developing countries, to take on commitments, as well. Still, that's a hypothesis with no test yet.

For the most part, developing countries, from [China and other giants](#) to those struggling with deep poverty and [a profound lack of energy options](#), say any new actions on their part are predicated on two things:

- Much deeper cuts in gas emissions by industrialized countries that built their wealth largely by burning fossil fuels,
- That the world's established powers pay for any costs borne by poorer nations as they adapt to climate change and shift away from business as usual on emissions.

On Friday, Prime Minister [Gordon Brown of Britain gave a speech on climate](#) in which he proposed that the rich nations ante up some \$100 billion a year in such assistance by 2020.

I asked [Nigel Purvis](#) of the group Climate Advisers how much the Waxman-Markey climate bill might contribute to developing countries.

“Financing for international forests from auction revenues would be approximately \$4 billion in 2020,” he wrote. “International adaptation assistance from auction revenues would be under \$1 billion in 2020. Funding through international offsets would be \$7 billion in 2020.” [UPDATE, 3:15 pm: [He elaborates in a comment below.](#)]

Any flow of money for deploying less-polluting energy technology in developing countries is likely to be constrained in any final climate bill by the Senate, which has expressed big concerns about the United States subsidizing the technological advancement of emerging competitors.

The bottom line remains, as the International Energy Agency warned in its [2008 World Energy Outlook](#), that 97 percent of projected growth in emissions of carbon dioxide from energy use through 2030 (without aggressive action) will come in developing countries, with three-fourths of that growth in China, India and the Middle East.

The pace of emissions and long-term warming largely will be determined by how the Obama administration and other leaders of industrialized powers handle that reality.

Here’s how Mr. Brown of Britain described that challenge in his London speech (prepared text):

Success will require two major shifts in how we think - as policy makers, as campaigners, as consumers, as producers, as a society. The first is to think not in political or economic cycles; not just in terms of years or even decadelong programs and initiatives. But to think in terms of epochs and eras — and how our stewardship will be judged not by tomorrow’s newspapers but by tomorrow’s children.

And the second is to think anew about how we judge success as a society. For 60 years we have measured our progress by economic gains and social justice. Now we know that the progress and even the survival of the only world we have depends on decisive action to protect that world. In the end, without environmental stewardship, there can be no sustainable prosperity and no sustainable social justice.

Do you think societies are capable of such shifts?

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
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By 2050 or so, the world population is expected to reach nine billion, essentially adding two Chinas to the number of people alive today. Those billions will be seeking food, water and other resources on a planet where, scientists say, humans are already shaping climate and the web of life. In Dot Earth, reporter Andrew C. Revkin examines efforts to balance human affairs with the planet's limits. Supported in part by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Mr. Revkin tracks relevant news from suburbia to Siberia, and conducts an interactive exploration of trends and ideas with readers and experts.

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New Options Needed



Access to cheap energy underpins modern societies. Finding enough to fuel industrialized economies and pull developing countries out of poverty without overheating the climate is a central challenge of the 21st century.

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Climate

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Enshrined in history as an untouchable frontier, the Arctic is being transformed by significant warming, a rising thirst for oil and gas, and international tussles over shipping routes and seabed resources.

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Society

Slow Drips, Hard Knocks



Human advancement can be aided by curbing everyday losses like the millions of avoidable deaths from indoor smoke and tainted water, and by increasing resilience in the face of predictable calamities like earthquakes and drought.

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Earth's veneer of millions of plant and animal species is a vital resource that will need careful tending as human populations and their demands for land, protein and fuels grow.

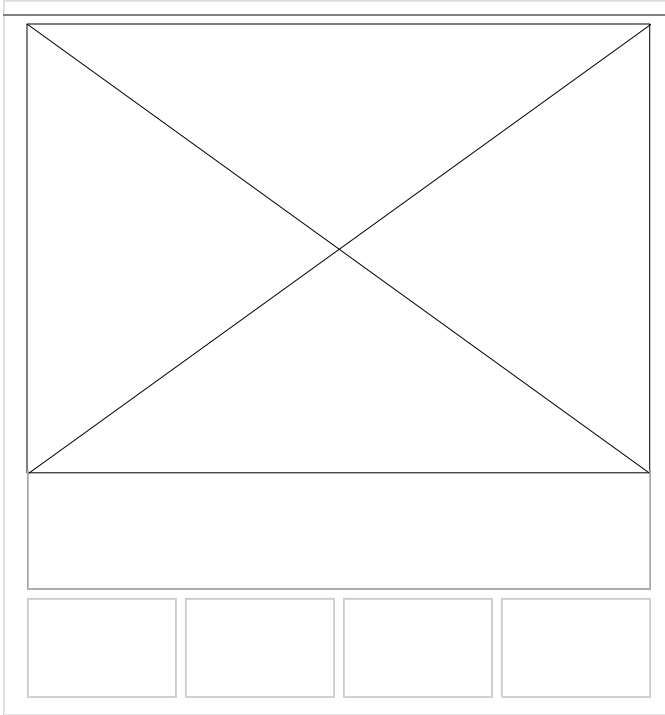
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Slide Show



[A Planet in Flux](#)

Andrew C. Revkin began exploring the human impact on the environment nearly 30 years ago. An early stop was Papeete, Tahiti. This narrated slide show describes his extensive travels.

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Some signs of progress in talks among the world's biggest emitters of greenhouse gases.

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The World Trade Organization and United Nations Environment Program describe the advantages and pitfalls of climate regulation.

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Since protests began two weeks ago, energy experts have been worried that tensions in Iran would spill over to the oil markets. So far that's not happened.

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