

Bush announces new global warming plan: a Valentine's Day gift for energy corporations

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US President George W. Bush unveiled on February 14 proposals that the administration claims are aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The plan is being promoted as an alternative to the Kyoto agreement on global warming, from which the US withdrew last spring. However, the administration's new policy, particularly as it affects carbon dioxide, will be entirely voluntary. It is essentially an abandonment of any attempt to curb such emissions, which are viewed by most scientists as the primary cause of global warming.

Carbon dioxide is the most potent of the so-called greenhouse gases, which tend to trap heat from the sun and therefore raise temperatures on Earth. It is released mainly through the combustion of fossil fuels such as oil and coal. For this reason, attempts to place caps on or reduce emissions have been strongly resisted by energy corporations, which exert a dominant influence within the present American government. The United States is responsible for a quarter of all greenhouse gas production, far more than any other country.

In March of last year, Bush declared that the US was unilaterally abandoning the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which, if ratified, would have required the US to reduce emissions by about 7 percent below 1990 levels within a decade. At the time, Bush declared that he would present an alternative plan that would not have such a harmful effect on the American economy as, he claimed, the Kyoto Protocol would.

In language reminiscent of the administration's rationale for its tax-cut proposals, the new plan is being promoted as a measure that will guarantee economic growth and secure jobs for American workers. In a speech to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Bush declared, "This new approach is based on the common sense idea that sustainable economic growth is the key to environmental progress—because it is growth that provides the resources for investment in clean technologies." White House spokesman Ari Fleischer argued that mandatory emission caps "would have a screeching-halt effect on the economy, and people would lose their jobs as a result."

The essential purpose of Bush's proposals, however, has nothing to do with securing jobs for workers and everything to do with making sure energy corporations and big business in general are not hampered by any restrictions. This is clear from a closer look at the proposals.

Rather than set definite limits on carbon dioxide emissions, the administration has invented a new term—"greenhouse gas

intensity"—which it defines as the ratio of carbon dioxide emissions to gross domestic product (GDP). It has set a non-mandatory goal of cutting this figure by 18 percent over the next decade. By using such language, the administration can pretend that it is setting a goal of *reducing* emissions when it is doing no such thing. As long as GDP grows, so can emissions, though with a reduction in the ratio between the two.

Thus, according to the federal Energy Information Administration, the measure that Bush calls greenhouse gas intensity fell by an average of 1.6 percent a year during the past 10 years, while emissions have steadily increased and the effects of global warming have become more apparent. The administration's goals would allow for a continuation of this basic trend. Carbon dioxide emissions are currently at about 15 percent above 1990 levels, and under the plan announced today, absolute levels of emissions could reach as high as 43 percent above 1990 levels by 2020. And this is assuming that all the suggested goals and voluntary reductions are actually implemented.

Bush's proposals abandon any pretense of complying with a commitment made in 1992 by the former President Bush that called for voluntary reductions in absolute levels of carbon dioxide emissions. At the Rio Earth Summit that year, the elder Bush said that the United States would voluntarily reduce emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

The administration is also urging companies to join a registry set up by the government to voluntarily report their carbon dioxide emissions. This is a continuation of a program initially set up in 1992 under Bush's father. The new plan would not make reporting any more extensive or requirements any more stringent than they have been for the past decade. The plan would also continue various tax incentives to consumers for purchasing fuel-efficient cars and the like—programs that have been in place for some time and have had no real effect.

As a safeguard against the unlikely event that actual restrictions are put in place in the future, businesses that agreed to join the registry would receive credits that the administration has guaranteed could be used or sold under any future system. That is, any companies producing more efficiently today will earn credits that can be sold to high-polluting companies in the future, assuring that no company will actually be forced to reduce emissions at any time. Thus Bush is not only allowing for unrestricted pollution today, but is seeking to place constraints on the ability of future administrations to implement such restrictions.

The idea of buying and selling credits has been promoted in the past by the American government in negotiations prior to US withdrawal from the Kyoto treaty. The point of such measures is to ensure that big corporations are exempt from regulations, because they can simply buy credits on the market. The now-defunct energy trader Enron supported such measures in the Kyoto Protocol because profits could be made by means of emissions credit trading and speculation.

Such a “cap-and-trade” program is the cornerstone of a parallel proposal for curbing sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and mercury, the pollutants responsible for acid rain and smog. These substances are not so closely bound up with the interests of energy corporations, and are not implicated in global warming. Even so, the plan would put off until 2018 the deadlines for utilities to comply fully with new emission targets for these substances. Some environmental groups have argued that the new plan would allow for slower reductions than laws already in place.

Predictably, the plan as a whole has received high praise from corporate America, winning the endorsement of groups such as the Edison Electric Institute and the National Association of Manufacturers. Jack Gerard, president of the National Mining Association and spokesman for the coal industry, commented that he thinks Bush is “taking his proposals as far as he could go without unnecessarily harming the economy. What we’re seeing is a balanced approach.”

However, the Bush plan has provoked opposition both at home and abroad. Jennifer L. Morgan of the World Wildlife Fund noted, “They are trying to set up mechanisms to allow indefinite increases in emissions.”

“This is a faith-based initiative,” said Phil Clapp, president of the National Environmental Trust. “We’re supposed to have faith that major corporations are going to line up and cut their global warming pollution. They haven’t been willing to do so for the last 10 years; there’s no reason to believe they’ll do that for the next 10 years.”

The proposals are also encountering some mild resistance from Congress. Independent Senator James Jeffords, who left the Republican Party last spring and is currently chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said, “Unfortunately, real carbon reductions appear to have completely fallen off the table in this climate policy.” Jeffords plans to begin action this month on legislation that would force cuts in carbon dioxide emissions.

Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman denounced Bush for his “feeble” leadership in combating global warming and declared he will begin Senate hearings next month to review the administration’s environmental record.

Overall, resistance in Congress to Bush’s plan is extremely weak considering its dangerous implications. Opposition from the Democrats in part represents concern over the effect it will have on an already severely strained transatlantic relationship. The withdrawal of the United States from the Kyoto agreement—which was signed late last year by most of the world, excepting the US, and includes mandatory emission reductions—provoked considerable anger over America’s unilateralist policy. The new global warming plan has only confirmed European suspicions that

the US—the world’s leading polluter—is determined to prevent strict emissions regulations.

Britain’s environment secretary, Margaret Beckett, issued a statement declaring that Bush’s plan “is in contrast with the net reduction in greenhouse gases that other developed world countries have agreed under the Kyoto Protocol and the seven percent reduction the U.S. originally agreed for that period.... In the UK’s view, the Kyoto Protocol, with its legally binding targets and timetables, remains the only workable basis for taking forward international action on climate change.”

Olivier Deleuze, Belgium’s Green Party energy minister, declared Bush’s plan to be “immoral,” commenting: “It’s really shocking ... it’s a bit like saying: ‘wealth is for us today in 2002 and we will leave the problems for our children or for people in Africa or Asia.’” French Environment Minister Yves Cochet called on the European Union to oppose the plan and urge Bush to ratify the Kyoto Protocol instead. The American proposals have also been met with a cool response from Japan, which has been one of the strongest supporters of Kyoto.

All of this comes in the wake of new evidence that the global warming trend of the past several years is continuing. Weather trends have been considerably more erratic recently, including an extremely mild autumn and winter for much of the United States and a severe draught on the East Coast. According to the federal National Climatic Data Center, the average national temperature for the November-January period was 39.94 degrees Fahrenheit, 4.3 degrees above the 1895-2001 long-term average.

Prior to this year, the record for the same period was 39.63 degrees Fahrenheit, set in 1999-2000. Over the past 25 years, the average temperature for November-January has risen at a rate of 1.2 degrees Fahrenheit per decade.

Globally, the World Meteorological Organization estimated that 2001 was the second warmest year on Earth since measurements were first systematically recorded in 1860. This is in spite of the cooling effect known as La Nina, a phenomenon that produces relatively cooler Pacific Ocean temperatures.

Nine of the ten warmest years on record have occurred since 1990. The warmest year was 1998, in part due to the effects of El Nino (La Nina’s opposite), followed by 2001 and 1997. The Hadley Center for Climate Prediction and Research in Britain, one of the world’s major forecasting centers, predicts there is a 75 percent chance that this year will be warmer than 2001.



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