

Record carbon dioxide emissions highlight climate change risks

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Global carbon dioxide emissions reached new and dangerous heights last year, according to a new assessment by the International Energy Agency (IEA). The data highlights the danger of extreme climate change, with devastating environmental, economic and social consequences.

The IEA estimated worldwide levels at 30.6 billion tons in 2010, exceeding the previous record set in 2008 by 5 percent. Growth in emissions of the heat trapping gas resumed last year after a slight decrease in 2009, as the global economic crisis triggered a drop off in energy use.

The IEA analysis presented an emissions scenario in which scientists are reasonably confident that temperature increases will stabilize at around 2°C, thereby limiting the most extreme impacts of climate change. According to this scenario, carbon dioxide emissions in 2020 must hold at or below 32 billion tons. However, if emissions in 2011 grow at an equal rate as last year, the scenario's target for 2020 will already be surpassed nine years ahead of time.

Dr. Fatih Biral of the IEA explained their significance. "Our latest estimates are another wake-up call. The world has edged incredibly close to the level of emissions that should not be reached until 2020 if the 2°C target is to be attained."

With the current structure of the global economy, there is scant chance that industry and government can reverse course to achieve this 2 degree target. As the IEA report points out, "80 percent of projected emissions from the power sector in 2020 are already locked in, as they will come from power plants that are

currently in place or under construction today."

The report underscores the complete failure of the major capitalist powers to take any measures to counteract carbon dioxide production, one of the principal causes of climate change. At a United Nations sponsored climate change conference in Cancun last year, governments agreed to a non-binding 2 degree target.

Commenting on the report, UN Climate Chief Christiana Figueres issued a half-hearted plea for the major governments to take significant steps at the next major conference on climate change later this year. "I won't hear that this is impossible," she said. "Governments must make it possible for society, business and science to get this job done."

Two years ago, the election of Obama was seen in the official circles around climate change talks as a significant turning point. The world's largest historical emitter, it was declared, would lead the way to a comprehensive plan for limiting climate change. Obama pledged during his campaign to make the US a leader, re-engaging internationally and implementing a binding cap domestically. As in every other element of policy, however, the US attitude toward climate change agreements has remained essentially unchanged.

The inaction of the major powers comes even as the risks and implications of climate change are become clearer. The US National Research Council this year highlighted the expected impacts for each degree of global temperature increase. They include:

- 5-10 percent changes in precipitation across many

regions

- 3-10 percent increases in the amount of rain falling during the heaviest precipitation events
- 5-10 percent changes in streamflow across many river basins
- 5 percent decreases in the annually averaged extent of sea ice across the Arctic Ocean, with 25 percent decreases in the yearly minimum
- 5-15 percent reductions in the yields of crops as currently grown

Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics explained in an interview with the *Guardian* that the current trajectory of carbon emissions, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's projections, translates to a 50 percent chance that global temperatures will increase by more than 4°C by 2100. He warned, "Such warming would disrupt the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people across the planet, leading to widespread mass migration and conflict. That is a risk any sane person would seek to drastically reduce."

This "insane" continuation of business as usual prompted yet another set of warnings, the latest in a seemingly constant stream of reports and proclamations by scientists frustrated by inaction. A group of Nobel Laureates last month issued a call to action known as the "Stockholm Memorandum." It states, "Science indicates that we are transgressing planetary boundaries that have kept civilization safe for the past 10,000 years. Evidence is growing that human pressures are starting to overwhelm the Earth's buffering capacity."

The memorandum continues, "We cannot continue on our current path. The time for procrastination is over. We cannot afford the luxury of denial. We must respond rationally, equipped with scientific evidence."

But it is precisely the inability of capitalism to form a rational, scientifically planned response that lies at the heart of the problem. Any potential global response to such a catastrophic problem as climate change immediately runs up against the profit motive and national divisions.

The preferred solution advanced by the more far-

sighted sections of the global elite—a coordinated set of national targets for greenhouse gas emissions with a market for trading credits across sectors and country boundaries—has proven no solution at all. The dubious effectiveness of such a mechanism aside, the current international negotiations under way offer little hope of even reaching such a minimal agreement.

Indicative were the remarks by Ian Fry, a delegate from the Polynesian nation of Tuvalu, which is threatened by the catastrophic impacts of sea level rise, during the latest preparatory meeting for the next UN climate conference. "We are concerned that we are going around in circles and making no progress. We are concerned that we have no guarantee that there will be a Kyoto Protocol at the end of this year," he told the assembly, and added that countries that did not support an extension of Kyoto should leave, eliciting cheers.

Furthermore, the World Bank recently reported that global carbon markets reached a turning point last year. Despite the highest emissions ever, the carbon markets shrank for the first time following five years of strong growth. The key market established for compliance with the Kyoto Protocol is now at its lowest level since it entered into force in 2005, having declined nearly by half.



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