

Bush's much-maligned climate talks could yet help global-warming treaty

At the meeting of the world's biggest polluters in Hawaii this week, host US has a chance to show it is serious about action on climate change.

By Peter N. Spotts, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / January 30, 2008

Leaders from the world's largest developed and developing countries gather in Honolulu today for two days of talks aimed at kick-starting broader international negotiations on a new global warming treaty.

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The agenda for those broader talks emerged from the UN climate conference in Bali in December, when ministers from more than 180 countries agreed on the issues negotiators need to deal with as they draft the new treaty over the next two years. The treaty would pick up where the 1997 Kyoto Protocol leaves off in 2012.

The Major Economies Meetings – which pull together representatives from 15 countries, the European Union and European Commission, and the UN – are designed "to focus on a few

key areas from the Bali road map where the major economies can make a detailed contribution to be brought into the UN negotiations," said Jim Connaughton, head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, at a briefing last Friday. The group represents countries producing the majority of today's greenhouse gas emissions.

President Bush lifted the lid on the agenda a bit during his State of the Union address Monday night when he proposed spending \$2 billion over the next three years to help developing countries pay for clean-energy technologies. Two days earlier, Japan had pledged \$10 billion.

Financing for such technologies has long been a thorn in the side of developing countries. Delegates from these countries in Bali last month angrily noted that developed countries are giving far less than they have pledged. Developing countries insist they need the help to make the emissions reduction commitments – however limited – a new climate treaty might require.

While Japan is offering a larger check, Mr. Bush's represents "a major landmark in addressing global warming," says Phil Clapp, deputy managing director of the Pew Environment Group.

In addition to putting money into a global clean-energy fund, delegates in Honolulu are also expected to talk about setting long-term emissions reduction goals – another flash point in Bali.

Bush's efforts has met with some skepticism, especially after the first meeting last September which one senior environmental hand described as "Climate 101 when the

rest of the world was in graduate school." One test of how serious the White House is about the process will come in discussions of future actions, some analysts say. Until now, the administration has emphasized actions it has already taken – setting an interim greenhouse gas "intensity" target for the US economy, or the amount of emissions permitted per unit of GDP, pumping money into climate change research, and the recent adoption of mandatory fuel economy standards.

The key question, however, is: What's next? "I would find the effort much more serious when the US government decides to put on the table what it thinks an appropriate near-term response and policy effort would be," says Joseph Aldy, co-director of Harvard University's Project on International Climate Agreements. "At some point, we need to see the ideas the Bush administration has on both of these fronts," and in a quantifiable way, he adds.

The process is slated to end this summer in a summit, perhaps tied to the G-8 meeting in Hokkaido, Japan. Ideally, the Bush effort would lead to a consensus on all the essential elements of a post-2012 agreement, says Elliot Diringer, director of international strategies at the Pew Center for Global Climate Change in Arlington, Va. The group is more likely to move on the few issues easiest to handle in the short time available, including aid to developing countries.

Overall, says Mr. Diringer, the broad concept of pulling major emitters together outside the UN process to better inform it is a useful one with a fair amount of support. It appears, for instance, in Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton's energy and climate policy statement as the "E-8." And the Bush effort may yet produce results. "The president wants a world leaders' summit at the end, and he needs some kind of deliverable," he says.

Still, expectations "are not high," he continues. "As other government see it, this is not the means for cutting a final deal" on climate "nor is this the administration to cut it with."