

No Hot Air on Global Warming

Five years ago, more than 100 world leaders came together for the first international Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, leaving a diaphanous trail of promises to clean the earth's atmosphere, save its rain forests and otherwise collaborate on common environmental challenges. Many of these leaders or their successors will convene at the United Nations this week to review their work. There is little to celebrate. The oceans are as polluted as ever, and deforestation proceeds at a ruinous pace. Perhaps the most conspicuous failure, however, involves the hugely contentious subject of global warming.

President Clinton cannot avoid addressing that issue when he speaks on Thursday. With only 4 percent of the world's population, the United States produces more than a fifth of the "greenhouse gases" like carbon dioxide that are contributing to a gradual and potentially disruptive warming of the earth's surface. Moreover, the United States has fallen well short of its Rio pledge to stabilize greenhouse emissions at 1990 levels by the year 2000. Only two of the industrialized nations that joined in that pledge, Germany and Britain, are expected to meet their targets. The United States will exceed it by 13 percent or more.

The Administration has already conceded that the voluntary approach endorsed in Rio is not working and that it will accept "binding," enforceable targets on greenhouse emissions if other industrialized nations go along. Mr. Clinton does not have to go much beyond that in his speech. A global treaty will not be signed until a final meeting in Kyoto, Japan, in December. But he has to sketch the outlines of a credible and economically feasible plan aimed at the earliest possible reductions. He must also send a strong signal that if there is a final agreement in Kyoto, he and his Vice President, Al Gore, will work hard to get it through Congress. Any serious plan to reduce greenhouse gases will carry political risks because it will not be cost-free. Mr. Clinton's audience will want to know whether he and Mr. Gore are up to the challenge.

The President has one important thing going for him. There is a far broader scientific consensus on global warming than there was in Rio five years ago and there are many more creative ideas about how to address it. Here is where the issue stands.

The Science. One reason why the industrialized nations opted for voluntary targets in Rio was that mainstream scientists simply could not agree whether man-made emissions had contributed to the small rise in global temperatures that began late in the 19th century. In 1995, however, the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, consisting of about 2,500 scientists, concluded that they had. Their language was cautious, their forecasts were gloomy.

Unless the current rates of combustion of carbon-based fuels — coal, gas, oil — could be reduced, they warned, temperatures would rise between 1.8

and 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit over the next century. Temperature changes in the middle level of that scale could cause a 20-inch rise in sea levels that would flood coastal lowlands and tropical islands, an increase in weather extremes, and global damage to forests and croplands. Despite challenges from businesses, which have been attacking the science in tobacco-industry fashion, the U.N. panel has not retreated from its basic findings.

Remedies and Costs. About one-third of the atmosphere's greenhouse gases is produced by electric power plants, one-third by cars and trucks and one-third by other commercial enterprises and ordinary households. Reducing these gases not only means using less energy. It will also require expensive investments in cleaner fuels, cleaner cars and new technologies.

Some industrial spokesmen have said that this is a recipe for national bankruptcy. Earlier this year, however, about 2,000 economists signed a statement asserting that the benefits of action on climate change outweighed the costs and that a well-tailored plan relying totally on market mechanisms could actually improve productivity. A study by the World Resources Institute reached the same conclusion. Both the economists and the study suggested that one mechanism could be a carbon tax that would make coal and petroleum fuels more costly and discourage consumption. The revenue from the tax would then be recycled into the economy in the form of lower payroll and corporate taxes, thus encouraging new investment.

Since a carbon tax is unlikely to fly in Congress, both the economists and the study suggested a more politically palatable option that the Administration has generally embraced — an international emissions-trading scheme that would set a global ceiling on emissions and give each country a national ceiling. The idea behind this scheme is that rich nations who cannot keep within their limits without crippling financial investments will be able to "buy" pollution permits from poorer countries whose economies are so inefficient that even the tiniest adjustments can achieve big reductions in greenhouse emissions.

This mechanism is not without flaws, and it remains to be seen whether everyone can agree on such a complicated scheme before Kyoto. But in the long run Mr. Clinton's greatest problem may be to convince Congress, which must ratify whatever emerges from Kyoto, to take the issue of global warming as seriously as the scientists do. That means taking it seriously himself and getting his Vice President, who has been silent on the issue of late, to speak out. It was Mr. Gore, after all, who asserted in "Earth in the Balance" that global warming "threatens to destroy the climate equilibrium we have known for the entire history of the human race. . . . The longer we wait, the more unpleasant our choices become."