

U.S., China Got Climate Warnings Toned Down

By Juliet Eilperin
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Some sections of a grim scientific assessment of the impact of global warming on human, animal and plant life issued in Brussels yesterday were softened at the insistence of officials from China and the United States, participants in the negotiations said.

In particular, U.S. negotiators managed to eliminate language in one section that called for cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, said Patricia Romero Lankao, a scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colo., who was one of the report's lead authors.

In the course of negotiations over the report by the second working group of the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, U.S. officials challenged the wording of a section suggesting that policymakers need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions because countries will not be able to respond to climate change simply by using adaptive measures such as levees and dikes.

In that instance, the original draft read: "However, adaptation alone is not expected to cope with all the projected effects of climate change, and especially not over the long run as most impacts increase in magnitude. ~~Mitigation measures will therefore also be required.~~" That second sentence does not appear in the final version of the IPCC Summary for Policymakers.

In a conference call with reporters early yesterday morning, Sharon Hayes, associate director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, said there was "a good deal of discussion" in Brussels over how best to summarize the report's scientific conclusions.

"And in this summary document there was a lot of care taken by all of the nations involved in the discussion to make sure that the certainty statements in this document -- whether scientists felt they had medium certainty or high certainty or very high certainty about different projected impacts -- were accurately reflected," Hayes said.

She declined to discuss specific negotiations over language, saying only that the U.S. government is satisfied with the final report.

Washington was not alone in seeking to alter some of the scientists' findings. China objected to wording that said "based on observed evidence, there is very high confidence that many natural systems, on all continents and in most oceans, are being affected by regional climate changes, particularly temperature increases." The term "very high confidence" means researchers are at least 90 percent sure of their findings.

When China asked that the word "very" be stricken, three scientific authors balked, and the deadlock was broken only by a compromise to delete any reference to confidence levels.

"That was a really hard discussion," said Romero Lankao, who participated in the talks. But the scientist, a lead author on the chapter examining the effect of global warming on industry, settlements and society, said the

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panel's overall message remained clear: "No one on Earth will escape the impacts of a warming planet."

Yesterday's report, titled, "Climate Change 2007: Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability," warned that human-generated warming is already making oceans more acidic and parched regions even drier. Twenty to 30 percent of the world's species may disappear if the world warms another 2.7 to 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit, the authors concluded, and the risk of massive floods will increase significantly along the coasts because of rising seas and more intense storms.

Much of the report focuses on how particular regions will fare in a warming world, concluding that less-developed countries will experience more upheaval than developed ones. River runoff and water availability is likely to increase 10 to 40 percent at high latitudes and in wet, tropical areas; the regions that already suffer from shortages of water are likely to have 10 to 30 percent less available.

NCAR scientist Kathleen Miller -- a lead author of the chapter on fresh water resources -- said she is confident that dry regions such as the American Southwest will experience more drought in future decades, but it is hard to predict how severe the changes will be.

"The extent of the damage will depend on how much warming we experience, and how rapidly it proceeds," Miller said.

The report also examines how infectious diseases might spread in a warmer climate. Jonathan Patz, an associate professor of environmental studies and population health sciences at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and a lead author of the North America chapter, said the currently projected warming alone will probably mean that by 2050, the Northeast will experience 68 percent more "red ozone alert" days indicating the air is unhealthy to breathe.

The U.S. strain of the West Nile virus is also especially responsive to warmer temperatures, Patz added, and Africa is expected to experience an uptick in malaria, a disease that already accounts for 1 million to 2 million deaths a year worldwide.

"Climate change presents one of the most challenging environmental and public health threats of this millennium," Patz said.

Bush's top environmental adviser, James L. Connaughton, told reporters in the conference call that the report "reinforces" the administration's belief that it is pursuing the right policies to combat climate change. This includes a push for increased auto efficiency and greater use of renewable fuels.

But [Rep. Edward J. Markey](#) (D-Mass.), who chairs a select House committee on climate change, said the administration is dealing only with a fraction of greenhouse gas emissions by regulating cars, and Congress is committed to passing a mandatory, economy-wide limit on emissions by the end of the year.

"The conclusions in the report are so scary that whatever success the Bush administration may have had in watering down the language won't have any impact on what the reaction of the world will be," Markey said in an interview, adding that Bush will soon have to decide whether to veto an emissions cap.

"Congress is heading toward a legislative showdown with the president on this issue. On that, there's no doubt."

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