

# JustComment

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## Kyoto Protocol: The Global Warming Phenomenon

**I**magine a world where there is no Antarctica or northern polar ice cap. Most of the world's coastal areas are submerged under rising oceans. Cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons are considerably more frequent, and far more powerful than they used to be. Places that used to have summer and winter now simply have wet and dry seasons.

Although an extreme scenario it is a viable look at the future of this planet if the current trend of global warming continues. In the past 100 years the planet has seen the average temperature rise .5 degrees Celsius. This small rise in temperature is still a huge change for an entire planet to undergo. Evidence of the effect of this temperature change can be seen in the polar ice caps where the ice is slowly melting and breaking apart.

### Kyoto Protocol

Scientists agree that the reason for this temperature change is the amount of greenhouse gases that humans have been emitting into the atmosphere post-industrialisation and especially since the 1950's. These greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, get released into the atmosphere, change its composition, and trap heat on the planet. In the past couple of decades, efforts have been made to curb the trend of global warming both through public awareness and policy adjustment. One of the most ambitious of these worldwide efforts is known as the Kyoto Protocol.

Outlined in 1992 at the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto protocol was developed in 1997 as a practical application of the international appeal to fight climate change and reverse the effects of global warming. Since then it has survived much debate over its content, as well as questions about who will ratify the protocol and when. The protocol needs ratification by at least 55 countries which account for 55% of the planetary greenhouse gas emissions. Vladimir Putin, the Russian president has recently signalled his intention to sign the protocol. With Russia's signature the protocol will have the minimum number of signatories needed to be put into effect.

The US, the world's foremost greenhouse gas emitter is the most notable non-signatory, and Australia, the largest per-capita greenhouse emitter in the world, has likewise refused to ratify.

### Goals of the Kyoto Protocol

The main objective of the Kyoto Protocol is not to remove greenhouse gases or to cease emission, but to simply limit the amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted. Limitations will be based at the same level of emissions for each country that they emitted in 1990. Adherence to the Kyoto Protocol guidelines would reduce worldwide greenhouse gas emissions by about 1%. Participating countries have to meet the requirements sometime between 2008 and 2012.

### Advantages of signing the protocol

At the conclusion of this time



period, additions to the protocol will be made and new goals and standards will be negotiated by the participating countries. Countries who have abstained from ratification of the Kyoto Protocol will not be able to take part in these negotiations but will have to abide by them if they wish to join at a later time. This factor remains one of the most compelling arguments for Australia to sign the Kyoto Protocol.

Although some may argue that it is impossible to reduce emissions by so much in such a short period of time, the protocol has mechanisms in place that would assist countries in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. One of these mechanisms is referred to as 'emissions trading'. With emissions trading, a country, such as Australia who may have trouble reaching their emissions reduction goal, can trade 'carbon credits' or amount of carbon they are

### Arguments for ratification:

- Currently the only international agreement in place that addresses climate change directly.
- Ratification guarantees participation in future Kyoto negotiations.
- Emissions trading allows for protection of important carbon sinks by countries that have the money to support them.
- Australians are the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases in the world.
- It is a start to harness a global effort.
- Some evidence of negative economic impact is unfounded and difficult to substantiate.
- Signing sends a powerful symbolic message of leadership and willingness to adjust our lifestyles.

### Arguments against Ratification:

- Sets a goal for emission standards but not atmospheric concentrations.
- Without US ratification, the protocol will suffer, as the US is by far the foremost polluter.
- Emission trading increases unfair distributions between wealthy and poor countries.
- Developing nations, such as India and China are not included in the protocol.
- Kyoto's 1% cut in emissions is far short of the 50-60% needed by 2100.
- The changeover to alternative energy methods would be costly in the short term to the economy.
- Commonwealth energy strategy shows willingness to lower emissions without need to sign protocol.

allowed to emit, with a country that has exceeded their goals. This way, both of the countries are able to achieve their goals.

Another mechanism designed to help countries reach their targets is the idea of carbon sinks, also known as carbon sequestering. Trees are the natural absorbers of carbon dioxide on earth. Recently, the destruction of jungles and natural forests has contributed to the amount of carbon that goes unabsorbed and is released into the atmosphere. The carbon sink theory relies on a country to protect forests, or launch campaigns of

reforestation, which in theory will make up for some of their carbon dioxide emissions. Hypothetically, by preserving or creating forestland, a country is able to balance out their emissions level.

### Problems with the Protocol

Virtually no one will argue over whether human induced climate change is a global issue that needs to be addressed. Although most agree that climate change is important, there are concerns that the Kyoto protocol is not the answer. Most complaints about the protocol concern its economic impact, as well as long-term effectiveness, given that it only applies to the developed world.

- The primary reason the United States and Australia have not signed it is that they believe it will be detrimental to their economies. They fear because of restrictions placed on emissions, companies who are large emitters of greenhouse gases will be forced to move their businesses out of the country to a place where Kyoto restrictions do not apply. This means a loss of revenue as well as a loss of domestic jobs. The more industrial a country is, the more exacerbated the problem becomes. Australia, due to its reliance on coal mining and power would be one of the hardest hit by this issue.

- Perceived effectiveness of the protocol is another concern. Although every country in the UN has the right to sign and support the protocol, the only countries that it applies to are developed, industrialized nations. Because the two most populous countries in the world, China and India, are considered developing, they have not been asked to ratify or adhere to the protocol's requirements.

### Action is needed now

It is predicted though, that by the time the protocol's requirements need to be met, developing nations who are not involved in the protocol will account for roughly 50% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. The United States has campaigned for the inclusion of quickly developing countries in the protocol so that they may be inclined to develop in energy efficient and environmentally sound ways.

By the end of this century, 50-60% of greenhouse emissions will need to be cut in order to have an effect on future global warming. Alternative methods of energy must be developed quickly, efficiently and cost effectively if we wish to stem this serious problem.

### Global warming consequences already evident in Pacific region.

Although Australia only accounts for 1% of global emissions, we are one of the few developed countries in the Pacific region. Many small island nations in the Pacific region, including Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati and the Cook Islands have seen significant rises in sea levels, increases in high tides and storm fronts, salination of water supplies and soil fertility, and unpredictable weather patterns. These threaten the culture, livelihoods and very existence of these island nations.

### Australian government strategy.

On June 15 this year, the Commonwealth government announced a new energy strategy. The \$500million fund aims to encourage private sector research into low cost options for renewable energy that reduce greenhouse emissions.

### Just Action

- For info check out these websites:  
[www.wri.org/facts/climate.html](http://www.wri.org/facts/climate.html)  
[www.pacinst.org/ccresource.htm](http://www.pacinst.org/ccresource.htm)  
[www.globalwarming.org/](http://www.globalwarming.org/)  
[www.lwf.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/globalwarming.html](http://www.lwf.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/globalwarming.html)  
[www.unfccc.int/resource/convkp.html](http://www.unfccc.int/resource/convkp.html)
- Or write to express your concerns or ideas to:  
Department of the Environment and Heritage  
John Gorton Building  
King Edward Terrace  
Parkes ACT 2600  
GPO Box 787  
Canberra ACT 2601  
  
Australian Greenhouse Office  
John Gorton Building  
King Edward Terrace  
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