

## **Obama wants worldwide end of fossil fuel subsidies**

By Seth Borenstein - AP Science Writer

In the Modesto Bee, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Wednesday, September 23, 2009

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama is calling on the world to end massive government subsidies that encourage the use of fossil fuels blamed for global warming.

The president, who is set to host the G-20 economic summit opening Thursday in Pittsburgh, will propose a gradual elimination, with the time frame to be determined, according to White House officials.

"Later this week, I will work with my colleagues at the G-20 to phase out fossil fuel subsidies so that we can better address our climate challenge," Obama said Tuesday at the United Nations global warming summit.

Mike Froman, Obama's national security adviser for economic affairs, said the main value of the proposal would be if it were multilateral. He declined to say if Obama was willing to go it alone and try to eliminate such subsidies just in the United States.

Many countries, including the United States, provide tax breaks and direct payments to help produce and use oil, coal, natural gas and other fuels that spew carbon dioxide, the chief greenhouse gas. Eliminating those would provide "a significant down payment" toward the U.S. goal of cutting fossil fuel emissions in half by 2050, Froman said.

The costs of these subsidies are estimated in the tens of billions of dollars annually worldwide. In the U.S. alone, the federal government gave \$72 billion in subsidies to the fossil fuel industry between 2002 and 2008, according to a study by the Environmental Law Institute.

The subsidies encourage the burning of fuel that leads to global warming and other pollution, Froman said. Eliminating the subsidies would help slow global warming, reduce health problems from pollution, make the United States more energy-independent and foster economic growth, he said.

Fossil fuel industry officials said the idea did not make sense and would hurt U.S. energy security. Environmentalists cheered the idea as a constructive use of free markets.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said in a report last week that removing fossil fuel subsidies could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 10 percent in 2050. OECD is a Paris-based international organization with 30 democratic countries as members, including the United States and most of Europe.

"Removing environmentally harmful subsidies to energy consumption and production would be an important first step," OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said. "It would also improve economic efficiency. For instance, the budgetary savings could be used to reduce other distorting taxes or to alleviate poverty in a more targeted and efficient way."

The biggest energy subsidies in non-OECD countries are in China, India, Brazil and Russia, according to the OECD. Twenty of the largest non-OECD countries spend more than \$400 million in fossil fuel subsidies that could be spent elsewhere, Froman said.

In 2008, countries that subsidized fossil fuels increased their consumption by one million barrels of oil, while those that didn't reduced their consumption by about 1.5 million barrels, Froman said.

In the U.S. the biggest fossil fuel subsidies are tax breaks, the foreign tax credit and the credit for production of nonconventional fuels that add up to \$29.4 billion over six years, according to the Environmental Law Institute report.

"We found that there is significantly higher subsidies of fossil fuels than of renewables" even though fossil fuel firms are more established, said study author John Pendergrass. "Some of it is going to companies making record profits."

While big oil companies make large profits, most American oil and natural gas producers are small and independent, said Jeff Eshelman, spokesman for the Independent Petroleum

Association of America. Eliminating subsidies "would be a direct hit on small independent businesses right away, the ones that are really providing America with its energy."

Eshelman said small producers tap 90 percent of U.S. wells, but that only translates to about 20 percent of oil Americans use.

Ending the subsidies could hurt development of crucial technology, such as carbon sequestration from coal plants, that is needed to fight global warming, said Frank Maisano, a Washington spokesman for coal utilities, oil refineries and wind developers. He said it also could hurt fuels that are homegrown.

Administration officials said Obama's proposal would not affect subsidies for climate friendly development, like carbon sequestration from coal plants.

But Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, a Washington environmental group, said there is "no greater cause of climate change than fossil fuels. There's no greater cause of that than artificial subsidies. It's a great idea to eliminate those subsidies and let the marketplace work."

## **Utility Quits Alliance Over Climate Change**

By Kate Galbraith, staff writer

N.Y. Times, Wed., September 22, 2009

Amid a growing split in the business community over climate policy, Pacific Gas and Electric, a major California utility, is withdrawing from the United States Chamber of Commerce, citing "fundamental differences" with the chamber's approach to global warming.

"We find it dismaying that the chamber neglects the indisputable fact that a decisive majority of experts have said the data on global warming are compelling and point to a threat that cannot be ignored," Peter A. Darbee, the chairman of PG&E, wrote in a letter to the chamber.

Excerpts of the letter, written last week, were published on PG&E's blog on Tuesday.

The chamber has been sharply critical of President Obama's efforts to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. It has recently threatened litigation if the Environmental Protection Agency does not re-examine its findings on the effects of climate change on the public.

"We have over three million members, and we don't comment on the comings and goings of our membership," Eric Wohlschlegel, a spokesman for the chamber, said in response to PG&E's announcement.

PG&E is the latest of a string of corporations to pull out of business organizations because of differences over climate policy.

Duke Energy, a large Southern utility that supports action against global warming, pulled out of the National Association of Manufacturers in December; climate was a partial factor, according to Thomas Williams, a spokesman.

In August, Duke left the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, also citing climate policy. "It was clear that many influential members would never support climate legislation in 2009 or 2010 no matter how it was written," Mr. Williams said in an e-mail message. Alcoa, the aluminum company, also pulled out of the coal coalition this summer, with climate policy being one factor, according to a spokesman.

Mr. Williams added, however, that Duke had no plans to leave the national chamber, saying that it dealt with many issues. The chamber's stance against efforts by the administration and Congress to regulate carbon dioxide, the main gas that causes global warming, has been the subject of vigorous debate in the business community.

The chamber supports reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in principle, but rejects any approach that it believes would drive up the price of energy and send American jobs overseas.

Many of the businesses critical of the chamber have embraced the approach taken by the administration and many Democrats in Congress, who want to cap carbon emissions and require businesses to buy permits to exceed the caps.

"We strongly disagree with the chamber's position on climate change legislation and particularly reject its recent theatrics" in calling for a review of the E.P.A.'s findings, Don Brown, a spokesman for PNM Resources, a New Mexico-based utility holding company, said in an e-mail message. Mr. Brown noted that PNM's chief executive recently stepped down from the chamber's board.

## **U.S., China vow fast action on climate change**

By John Heilprin, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Wednesday, September 23, 2009

United Nations - -- President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao each vowed urgent action Tuesday to cool an overheating planet, even as prospects dimmed for a full treaty by the end of the year.

The world's two biggest greenhouse-gas polluting nations were the focus at the U.N.'s unprecedented daylong climate change summit, which drew more than 50 presidents and 35 prime ministers, along with many environment ministers and at least one prince.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the gathering with an appeal to leaders to set aside national interests and think about the future of the globe - and a rebuke for their foot-dragging thus far.

"The climate negotiations are proceeding at glacial speed. The world's glaciers are now melting faster than human progress to protect them - and us," the U.N. chief said.

Failure to reach a new international pact on climate change "would be morally inexcusable, economically shortsighted and politically unwise," Ban warned. "The science demands it. The world economy needs it."

At the end of the summit, however, Ban and Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen, who will host the treaty talks, said they were encouraged at the prospects. "This feeling of political momentum - that was very strong," said Loekke Rasmussen.

Tuesday's U.N. gathering and the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh this week are seen as an attempt to pressure rich nations to commit to a global climate treaty at Copenhagen in December, and to pay for poorer nations to burn less coal and preserve their forests.

With a mere 76 days to go before the pivotal conference, it appeared an interim agreement might be the most that could be expected in December, leaving difficult details for later talks.

"We are on the path to failure if we continue to act as we have," French President Nicolas Sarkozy cautioned.

Much attention was fixed on Obama's first U.N. speech, in which he pledged the United States is "determined to act."

"The threat from climate change is serious, it is urgent and it is growing," Obama said, after receiving loud applause. "And the time we have to reverse this tide is running out."

But while Obama campaigned for the presidency vowing to push through stringent cuts in U.S. emissions, he has run up against stiff resistance among Republicans, and the Senate most likely won't have written climate legislation until after the Copenhagen meeting.

By comparison, Hu runs a command economy and was unencumbered by political opposition. He outlined an ambitious program that included plans to plant enough forest to cover about 150,000 square miles - an area the size of Montana - and generate 15 percent of its energy needs from renewable sources within a decade.

He said the communist nation would also take steps to improve energy efficiency and reduce "by a notable margin" its growth rate of carbon pollution as measured against economic growth - though he did not give any specific numerical targets.

"At stake in the fight against climate change are the common interests of the entire world," Hu said. "Out of a sense of responsibility to its own people and people across the world, China fully appreciates the importance and urgency of addressing climate change."

Still, China and other developing nations "should not ... be asked to take on obligations that go beyond their development stage," Hu said.

China and India, the world's fifth-biggest greenhouse gas emitter, both want to link emissions to their growth in gross domestic product, meaning they still may increase emissions even if they take fundamental steps to curb them in the long run.

Experts were watching China closely because it has in the past largely ignored global efforts to diminish emissions. The United States, under former President George W. Bush's administration, stayed away from international commitments citing inaction by major developing nations like China and India.

China and the United States each account for about 20 percent of all the world's greenhouse gas pollution, created when coal, natural gas or oil are burned. The European Union is next, generating 14 percent, followed by Russia and India, which each account for 5 percent.

## **U.S., China seek to reignite global talks on climate change**

**Speeches by Presidents Obama and Hu at a U.N. summit are well received. But skeptics say that action alone can lead to a global agreement in Copenhagen this year.**

By Christi Parsons and Jim Tankersley, staff writers  
L.A. Times, Wed., Sept. 23, 2009

Reporting from Washington and New York - The world's two biggest producers of greenhouse gases sought to build momentum Tuesday for stalled efforts to craft a global agreement to limit emissions, with China pledging to make sweeping changes by 2020 and President Obama exhorting world leaders to act to avert catastrophe.

Critics of the two countries, which together produce 40% of the gases that cause global warming, were cheered by the cooperative tone from Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao at a United Nations summit in New York. But they said that much more than positive words would be necessary if negotiators are to complete an international accord by a December deadline.

In his first speech during a week of international meetings, Obama made an impassioned pitch to an international community that has grown skeptical of his ability to lead the effort to confront climate change. He acknowledged that the U.S. carries a portion of the blame for global warming, offering a stark assessment of the dangers of climate change and a resounding pledge that the United States would address it.

"We understand the gravity of the climate threat," Obama said. "We are determined to act. And we will meet our responsibility to future generations."

But he stopped short of calling for Senate passage of a bill to limit greenhouse gas emissions, the one action that would most soothe international concerns about Americans' resolve on the issue.

Though declining to commit to specific reductions, China's president spoke in more detail about his nation's plans.

In his speech at the summit, Hu said that by 2020 China would plant 154,000 square miles of forest, which scrubs the air of carbon dioxide. That is an area slightly smaller than California. He set a target of drawing 15% of China's energy from non-fossil fuels by the same year, and said China would boost its efforts to develop renewable energy technology.

The U.N. conference came at a time of rising concern about progress in the talks leading up to a summit in December in Copenhagen that is intended to cap a new global climate agreement. European officials say the negotiations are nearly at a deadlock. Obama administration officials say they think there still is cause for hope, but also are leaving open the possibility that talks will extend into next year.

In private meetings and public comments throughout the day, Obama tried to make the case for a cooperative effort. He touted steps the U.S. had taken to reduce its carbon "footprint," including investing economic stimulus money in clean energy projects and raising vehicle emission standards.

But environmental activists found more to praise in China's approach.

"It's a very positive sign that they did it on an international stage," said Jake Schmidt of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "They don't like to put their leader out there and not deliver on it."

Obama, he added, "didn't send quite as clear a message as the world was hoping for. . . . It is not clear that the administration will have anything to say in Copenhagen, and it makes people very nervous. How do you move forward when the world's biggest player is not involved?"

And despite the positive tone, strains that have limited progress in the climate negotiations still were evident.

Hu told the assembly he would measure the cuts in terms of China's gross domestic product, and didn't set a firm figure, indications that China is worried about possible effects on its economic growth.

China and India argue that it is unfair to penalize developing countries with specific targets for reducing emissions. Hu called on richer nations such as the United States to "take up their responsibility and provide new, additional, adequate and predictable financial support to developing countries" to help reduce emissions.

But the Obama administration is under intense pressure from Congress members from Rust Belt states to penalize Chinese imports if that country does not limit its emissions.

Rep. James F. Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin, the top Republican on the House committee on global warming, said, "There is only one thing China, India and other nations can say that will have a significant impact on the upcoming U.N. climate change talks in Copenhagen, and that is: 'We will join developed countries in legally binding emission cuts.' Anything short of that commitment is just window dressing."

In the wake of the speeches, many environmental groups immediately turned their attention back to Capitol Hill.

Climate commitments from China and other countries "should give President Obama and the Senate the confidence to act before Copenhagen," Jennifer Morgan, the climate and energy program director of the World Resources Institute, said in a statement. "The world has been hearing, 'Yes, we can; yes, we must,' but now needs to hear, 'Yes, we will.' "

Carol Browner, Obama's point person on climate issues, suggested that it's better for the president to make the best of his current situation. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) is in charge of the schedule, she said, not the White House.

The administration is "using laws on the books," she said, "to make a very important down payment."

Still, the president laid down a personal marker on the issue of global warming, speaking in starker terms than he has used in months to describe the risk of not acting.

"The security and stability of each nation and all peoples -- our prosperity, our health, our safety -- are in jeopardy," Obama said. "And the time we have to reverse this tide is running out."

He asserted that individual countries can pursue economic prosperity while doing their part to protect the planet.

"Each of us must do what we can, when we can, to grow our economies without endangering our planet, and we must all do it together," Obama said. "We must seize the opportunity to make Copenhagen a significant step forward in the global fight against climate change."

The poorest nations have more to gain by correcting course, Obama suggested, arguing that they suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate change.

"For these are the nations that are already living with the unfolding effects of a warming planet -- famine and drought, disappearing coastal villages and the conflict that arises from scarce resources," Obama said.

"Their future is no longer a choice between a growing economy and a cleaner planet, because their survival depends on both."

### **Fairbanks warned of possible pollution sanctions**

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, September 22, 2009

FAIRBANKS, Alaska—A law firm hired by the Fairbanks North Star Borough says it could face sanctions if it fails to clean up air pollution.

The law firm—Birch, Horton, Bittner and Cherot—says the borough could lose highway construction funds and other aid from the federal government.

Residents vote Oct. 6 on how air pollution prevention programs should be run.

The Fairbanks News-Miner reports the law firm also warns that military expansion could be endangered and efforts to build a coal-fired power plant could be compromised if Fairbanks refuses to cooperate with state air quality plans.

Mayor Jim Whitaker called the implications of the memo significant.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has said it will draft and enforce pollution-prevention measures if local officials decline to do so.

Residents attending Borough Air Pollution Control Commission meetings have asked for more study before restrictions are imposed on wood- or coal-burning stoves.

### **Big Polluters Told to Report Emissions**

By Leslie Kaufmann, staff writer

N.Y. Times, Tues., Sept. 22, 2009

The Environmental Protection Agency said on Tuesday that it would require the nation's biggest emitters of greenhouse gases to start tracking their emission levels on Jan. 1 and report them to the government.

The E.P.A. said the reporting would cover roughly 85 percent of the greenhouse-gas emissions in the United States linked to global warming.

The new rules would require 10,000 industrial sites and suppliers of petroleum products to submit the data beginning in 2011. Suppliers of fossil fuels will be asked to estimate how much carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases are emitted when the fuels are burned by businesses and consumers in buildings and cars, the agency said.

The E.P.A. said it had no firm estimate on how many businesses had the training and systems in place to report on their emissions.

But a large percentage of those covered by the new regulations are already required to report emissions under other programs sponsored by the agency, it said. The agency said it had also been reaching out to businesses and offering training in how the emissions can be measured.

The E.P.A. said the reporting system would provide vital data to businesses seeking to compare and control their emissions and better information to the government, which has been trying to forge a policy on how to combat climate change since President Obama took office.

“The American public, and industry itself, will finally gain critically important knowledge and with this information we can determine how best to reduce those emissions,” Lisa P. Jackson, the agency’s administrator, said in a statement.

Yet the rules, proposed last March, remain controversial.

Many businesses have asserted that the reporting requirement is a first step toward burdensome and needless government regulation.

Senator Lisa Murkowski, Republican of Alaska, has been circulating a draft amendment to a federal budget bill that would prevent the E.P.A. from monitoring carbon dioxide being released from stationary sources like power plants.

But some business organizations have recently taken a less antagonistic stance. “We have always supported transparency and do not oppose the reporting requirement,” said Bill Kovacs, senior vice president for environment, technology and regulatory affairs at the United States Chamber of Commerce.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Commentary, Wednesday, Sept. 23, 3009:](#)  
**Commentary: Visalia on course to becoming a cooler, greener city**  
Dean Mann, Environment

On Jan. 8, the City Council of Visalia adopted a resolution to join the U.S. Council of Mayors Climate Protection Program The Cool Cities program. Long before adopting that resolution, the city had already taken important steps in that direction.

You will find below an impressive list of actions the city has taken and continues to take to make this a Cool City, to reduce global warming, to improve the environment and improve the efficiency of resources used in Visalia.

- Completed Visalia's greenhouse gas (GHG) emission inventory to identify and reduce GHG emissions and improve energy efficiency, and developed a draft Climate Action Plan for reducing GHG emissions.
- Converting traffic signals to LED by 2010. LEDs use only 7 to 12 watts compared with 65 to 135 watts for incandescent lights.
- Implementing the appropriate energy-efficient retrofitting based on a 2008 Southern California Edison energy audit by mid-2010 (i.e., occupancy sensors, lighting). Implementation of the feasible recommendations will reduce energy use and costs.
- Completed demonstration of a parking lot project using solar powered lighting, drought-tolerant landscaping, as well as a permeable blacktop to allow waste to naturally percolate into soil.
- Installing solar lighting at Visalia City Coach bus stops as funding permits.
- Upgrading Visalia Municipal Airport signage lighting and all of its runway lighting to LEDs in fall 2009.

- Encouraging use of public clean natural gas (CNG) facilities, as well as CNG and other alternative-fuel vehicles. The city's automotive fleet has been making the shift to alternative fuels for many years. The city operates 22 hybrid vehicles; three hybrid-electric downtown trolleys; 33 solid-waste trucks that utilize Best Available Control Technology, which is a diesel particulate filter and helps to reduce emissions out of diesel engines; 31 solid-waste trucks and 32 city buses that use CNG; and 26 flex-fuel vehicles.
- Working with the recently approved Valley Innovative Energy Watch to develop an education program that includes information, conservation kits and efficient light bulbs.
- Distributed 50 Vi-cycles to businesses for use by employees or customers to reduce car emissions, congestion and improve air quality.
- Developing a Green Building Program for residential development that includes input from a diverse group of stakeholders, including the development community. The goal is to have an initial draft prepared by fall 2009.
- Increased the staffing of the Natural Resource Conservation Division's water conservation team to help educate the community on the need to conserve water in the city. A new manager, Kim Loeb, has been appointed to enhance these and other efforts.
- Required that all new qualified city building projects participate in Southern California Edison's saving by design whole building approach, and that all new city building be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) equipped and/or incorporate as many LEED principles as possible. The new police substations are examples of this approach.
- Initiating a pilot program for food-waste composting. Staff recognizes the value in having an alternative for food waste, especially food waste from commercial facilities. Staff has looked at several options, and is investigating grant options.
- The city operates the Sequoia Shuttle Service in conjunction with Sequoia National Park that operates on CNG for transportation into the national parks, thus minimizing vehicle trips and carbon dioxide emissions.

In addition, the city collects batteries. Thus far, it has collected 1,330.1 pounds and expects to have an entire ton by the end of the year.

It is distributing reusable bags widely to the citizenry to reduce the use of plastic bags.

The city has sponsored Earth Day each year, with volunteers planting trees, removing trash and getting rid of undesirable plants along our waterways.

The Environment Committee is working on ordinances to reduce water use in the city, especially in years of severe drought, and also the possibility of drastically reducing or eliminating the use of plastic bags.

In a recent report, the city was ranked 27 out of 371 cities in the state in terms of the use of solar panels and has the capacity to rank 18th.

The city continues to work in these areas and to make important strides. I believe these are very essential and I hope the city goes forward. If anyone would like to respond or comment on these matters or issues concerning the environment, send such messages to Allen Dimick, Visalia Environmental Committee Chair, 425 E. Oak Ave., Suite 201, Visalia, CA 93291, or fax them to 713-4800.

*Dean Mann is a member of the Visalia Environmental Committee, a city-approved volunteer organization that advises the city.*

### **Additional Facts**

How to attend



- What: Tulare/Kings Green Building Council to host Visalia City Council candidates forum on sustainability and green building issues.
- When: 5:30 p.m. Oct. 7.
- Where: Visalia Marriott Hotel, 300 S. Court St.
- Cost: \$5, light hors d'oeuvres will be served.
- Why: This forum will provide an opportunity for City Council candidates to comment on current topics related to resource conservation and energy efficiency in the Valley.

[Sacramento Bee Editorial, Wednesday, September 23, 2009](#)

### **Editorial: Invest now, save energy tomorrow**

While economically distressed local governments are mostly enmeshed in the grim task of cutting budgets these days, at least one innovative idea is under serious consideration locally. Next week both the Sacramento City Council and the county Board of Supervisors are expected to give conceptual approval to an exciting new program designed to help residents finance energy efficiency upgrades to their homes and businesses.

Known as the AB 811 program, after the bill signed into law last year that made it possible, the program gives cities and counties the authority to create special financing districts. Using startup funds generated initially by federal stimulus money and California Energy Commission grants and possibly the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, residents will be able to tap into the fund to finance energy efficiency improvements to their properties – new, more efficient heating and air conditioning systems, for example, or better insulation, weatherization, whole-house fans or even rooftop solar panels. If the financing scheme works, private investors may be approached in the future.

The loan payment is attached to the borrower's property tax bill. That is what makes the program truly innovative. Unlike a conventional loan, AB 811 debt stays with the property, not the borrower. So when borrowers sell their homes or businesses, the benefit of the energy efficiency improvement stays with the property and passes to the new property owner, and so does the debt.

The Sacramento AB 811 program, dubbed SAVES for Sacramento Area Voluntary Energy Savings, gives residents one more option for financing energy-efficient upgrades. It lowers demand for energy, helps reduce pollution and greenhouse gases, increases property values and saves money on utility bills, among other things. It also boosts investment in energy-saving industries and green jobs.

Sacramento County officials estimate the program here would generate 725 new jobs and \$170 million in new spending locally.

But it's not risk-free. It increases debt at a time when many homeowners and businesses are struggling. Property owners who buy in to the program have to be creditworthy and able to pay the new, higher costs. Depending on the cost of the improvement financed, even with the anticipated utility bill savings, in some cases, it could take years before the borrower recoups the cost of the initial investment.

Next week's votes at the Sacramento City Council and the Board of Supervisors would approve merely a notice of intent. The hard work of designing a specific ordinance that would detail the kinds of energy improvements eligible and the terms of the loans and identify a third-party administrator to manage the program will take more time.

Eventually, Sacramento officials hope to expand their program across the region, into Placer County and beyond. A regional approach will help make the program both more cost-effective and more competitive when local officials apply for state and federal grants.

Other jurisdictions have already moved forward with AB 811 programs. Sacramento is right to consider it. If it works for energy efficiency, similar financing schemes might make sense for water conservation as well.

[L.A. Times editorial, Wed., Sept. 23, 2009:](#)

### **U.S., China and climate change**

**At the U.N., Beijing commits to strict greenhouse gas restrictions, while President Obama offers lofty rhetoric and little detail.**

Even if the United States is gradually losing its status as the world's economic, diplomatic and military superpower, there is one category in which, as of Tuesday, it has emerged as the undisputed No. 1: We are the most environmentally irresponsible nation on Earth.

For the past few years, we've been sharing the title of world's worst climate change offender with China, whose rapid rise in greenhouse gas emissions and refusal to take strong action to curb them made it as big a villain, in the eyes of the rest of the world, as the U.S. That changed at a United Nations climate summit Tuesday when the presidents of the two countries stood up to present their plans to address the problem.

China's Hu Jintao announced concrete steps to reduce his nation's carbon footprint, such as getting 15% of its power from non-fossil sources by 2020, planting enough forest to cover an area the size of Norway and limiting the growth of carbon emissions as a percentage of the country's gross domestic product. President Obama, meanwhile, gave a speech that was as packed with high-flown rhetoric as it was devoid of any new proposals. U.N. climate chief Yvo de Boer no doubt echoed the thoughts of many at the summit when he said that, as a result of China's dramatic policy shift, it "could well become the front-runner in the fight to address climate change. The big question mark is the U.S."

To be more specific, the big question mark is the U.S. Senate. The House last summer passed a sweeping climate change bill that, if enacted, would leave China in the dust. It would cap carbon emissions at 17% of 2005 levels by 2020. It would also require the nation to get 20% of its power from renewable sources, or from greater energy efficiency, by that year. Yet the bill has stalled in the Senate and, without a lot more effort from Democratic leaders and the Obama administration, is unlikely to come to the floor this year. That will put the U.S. in a woefully weak position in December, when negotiators meet in Copenhagen to hammer out a global climate agreement.

Together, the U.S. and China account for about 40% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Beijing's plans to link pollution to economic growth are disappointing, because they will allow emissions in the rapidly developing country to keep rising. But its commitment to specific carbon limits still trumps the U.S., which has yet to set a national renewable energy standard, let alone a carbon-cutting goal. In Washington, climate change is testing a democratic political system that has always had trouble making present sacrifices to ward off future threats. For the sake of our global status and the well-being of our children, we must pass that test.