

Canadian Kyoto compliance plans still hazy

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OTTAWA (CP) - Environment Minister Stephane Dion says he doesn't see any point in debating whether Canada can meet its Kyoto target for cutting greenhouse emissions.

Instead, says Dion, Canada should just go ahead and implement "best practices" for cutting emissions and see whether they are adequate to meet its objective under the climate-change treaty.

Dion's comments seem to raise questions about the depth of Ottawa's commitment to the Kyoto target - a six-per-cent cut in greenhouse emissions from 1990 levels during the 2008-2012 period.

"We will see in 2012, 2014, when we have all the computation, if we have reached our target on that," he said in an interview. "But I understand how paralyzing it may be to argue up to death about 'Can we reach our target?'"

"I think it (debate about the target) is becoming more symbolic than effective. I would like to shift the debate about the best practices, and we'll see how much megatonnes of savings it will give us."

Canada ratified Kyoto under former prime minister Jean Chretien in December 2002, and the treaty will enter into force with Russia's ratification, expected soon.

Since 1998 Ottawa has allocated at least \$2 billion for measures intended to curb greenhouse pollution, and the 2003 budget committed another \$2 billion over five years.

Yet emissions have continued to rise, and are now 20 per cent above 1990 levels. A Kyoto implementation plan released two years ago was implicitly dismissed as inadequate by Paul Martin when he entered office.

"What I have said very clearly is you need a plan to determine whether in fact you can meet those targets," Martin said. "And we have not yet developed that plan, certainly not to my satisfaction."

Dion agrees that a plan is needed, but says there already is a plan which only needs to be refined. He suggests that many of the answers on Kyoto can be found in the government's recent throne speech.

However, the throne speech's references to Kyoto were general and vague.

"The government reiterates that it will respect its commitments under the Kyoto accord on climate change in a way that produces long-term and enduring results while maintaining a strong and growing economy," said the speech.

"It will do so by refining and implementing an equitable national plan, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments and other stakeholders."

It's estimated that Canada needs emission cuts of 240 megatonnes by 2010 to meet the Kyoto target. But Dion is skeptical about the whole exercise of measuring greenhouse emissions, or cuts in emissions.

"I'm always suspicious when I find forecasting of that. I think we need to continue to do it, but today the main debate is about this exercise (estimating emissions) instead of identifying the best practices."

Dion contended that many promises in the throne speech will yield Kyoto-related benefits - noting, for example, that money from the sale of Petro Canada will be used to commercialize new environmental technologies.

New urban policies, plans to boost wind power, and promises for the greening of government procurement will all contribute to meeting Kyoto targets, he said.

"Maybe not in one shot, but through the process you will see dramatic changes. A lot of technologies are existing now that are not used as they may be."

Matthew Bramley of the Pembina Institute said it is puzzling that the minister does not want to discuss progress toward a quantifiable target.

"I think it's very dangerous to imagine that there is not a target we have to comply with. Climate change would be nowhere near where it is now on the political agenda if we were not facing a legally binding target."

Bramley was not sure how to interpret Dion's emphasis on best practices.

"The term 'best practices' is vague. It could imply a voluntary approach, particularly to industry, but it could also mean taking the best examples of policies that governments have implemented to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and doing the same.

"I very much hope that's what it means, because if we pursue a voluntary approach to emissions reductions we're not going to get anywhere near the Kyoto target."

The single most important measure would be a legislated cap on industrial greenhouse emissions, as has been enacted by the European Union, said Bramley.

Dion said the government has not decided whether to introduce legislation that would cap industrial emissions. It is one of the proposals under consideration, he said.

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