

Environmental Watch

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Some Lessons Ten Years After Patty Murray Voted Against The Kyoto Treaty

by Todd Myers

Claim

“The United States should not be a signatory to any protocol to, or other agreement regarding, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992, at negotiations in Kyoto in December 1997, or thereafter, which would (A) mandate new commitments to limit or reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the Annex I Parties, unless the protocol or other agreement also mandates new specific scheduled commitments to limit or reduce greenhouse gas emissions for Developing Country Parties within the same compliance period, or (B) would result in serious harm to the economy of the United States”

Senate Resolution 98, 105th Congress, 1st Session, Passed 95-0, July 25, 1997

Facts

Ten years ago on July 25, Senator Patty Murray joined 94 other Senators in voting for Senate Resolution 98, intended to provide guidance to the Clinton Administration in its negotiations of the Kyoto Treaty on reductions of greenhouse gasses. The Resolution could not have been more explicit in opposing the direction of the treaty. The overwhelming nature of the resolution was a major reason that the Clinton Administration never placed the treaty before the Senate after it finished the negotiations in 1997.

Since the Senate voted against the principles of Kyoto, that treaty has become a political football. In 2003, Senator Murray herself argued that “President Bush walked away from the Kyoto Protocol negotiations in March 2001,”¹ despite her own vote against the treaty. While the politics have changed since 1997, we are now in the position to judge, with the benefit of hindsight, the issues raised then and examine the effectiveness of the Kyoto treaty on reducing CO₂ emissions.

Europe’s Experience With Kyoto

In 1997, when Europe agreed to the Kyoto targets of 8 percent below 1990 greenhouse gas emissions levels, they had already made great progress. The core of the European Union (EU), known as the EU15, had already reduced CO₂ equivalent (which includes other greenhouse gases like methane) emissions, called CO₂e, by 4.2 percent.² Emissions from energy, the largest portion of emissions had fallen 1.8 percent in large part due to the UK’s switch from coal to natural gas and the inclusion of economically destroyed East Germany with Germany.

The trends since 1997, when the Kyoto Treaty was finalized, are very different.

Between 1997 and 2005, total CO₂e actually increased slightly, with energy-related emissions increasing nearly five percent. As a result, the EU is unlikely to meet the Kyoto targets unless there are dramatic declines in CO₂e during the upcoming years, despite benefitting from what

¹ Sen. Patty Murray, “Statement by Senator Patty Murray In Support of McCain/Lieberman Climate Change Legislation,” October 30, 2003 (Accessed 7/24/2007)

² European Environment Agency, “EEA - Data service pivot review,” <http://dataservice.eea.europa.eu/dataservice/viewdata/viewpvt.asp> (Accessed 7/25/2007)



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amounted to a 50 percent head start on meeting the targets when the treaty was signed in 1997. The EU15 will have to reduce their CO₂e by 7.2 percent from the 2004 levels to meet the target.³ This is unlikely given that the recent trend has been generally upward.

This is one reason that the U.S., Canada and Australia either decided not to sign Kyoto or pulled out. While Europe enjoyed a significant head start on meeting the targets, the U.S. was 10 percent above 1990 CO₂e levels in 1997⁴, meaning that the US would have to reduce those emissions by 15 percent overall, compared to Europe's 4 percent reduction. Considering that Europe has failed to meet even its very low target, the chance of the U.S. meeting the CO₂e reductions without a significant impact on the economy were negligible. That prospect of "serious harm to the American economy" is the very reason the Senate Resolution drew unanimous support.

What Now?

So, what are the options beyond Kyoto?

First, any long-term strategy that seeks to reduce CO₂e without doing serious damage to the economy will be based in large part on technology and efficiency improvements. This is already paying off. In 2006, the Energy Information Administration estimates that CO₂e in the U.S. fell by 1.3 percent, faster than the decline in Europe for 2005, the most recent year available. This occurred despite robust economic growth of 3.3 percent.

A number of factors contributed to this, including, ironically, a mild weather year. However, the efficiency of the U.S. economy has been steadily improving for many years. The intensity of CO₂e emissions per unit of GDP has fallen by 22 percent since 1990.

Next, we need to work with developing countries to improve their energy efficiency. Three-quarters of the increase in CO₂e is now coming from developing countries. While the U.S. remains the largest emitter of CO₂e, it is a small portion of new CO₂e, and if the 2006 trend holds, it will actually be a shrinking portion.

Improving the economic strength of developing countries actually helps reduce the amount of CO₂e emissions. A study in *Science Magazine* highlighted the impact of economic growth on efficiency, noting that when the Soviet bloc collapsed, CO₂e emissions from those countries declined, but only because the economy shrank significantly. The CO₂e emissions per unit of GDP, however, increased. As the economies recovered, efficiency improved to the point that by the time economic output again reached 1990 levels, CO₂e emissions were dramatically lower.

Costs

Estimates vary on the cost of Kyoto treaty on the U.S. economy. Government estimates run as high as 4% of the economy by the Energy Information Administration.⁵ If the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is correct in its estimates on the potential cost of climate change, it is likely that the cure is worse than the disease. This, however, does not mean that we should do nothing to reduce CO₂ emissions. As we've argued in the past, there are a number of opportunities to reduce CO₂ emissions in ways that are affordable and act as an insurance policy. We can reduce CO₂ in a cost-effective way as we better understand the true costs

³ Energy.eu, "Energy.eu - Europe's Energy Portal," <http://www.energy.eu/#statistics-section> (Accessed 7/25/2007)

⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "H.1co2 World Carbon Dioxide Emissions from the Consumption and Flaring of Fossil Fuels, 1980-2004," <http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/international/iealf/tableh1gco2.xls> (Accessed 7/24/2007)

⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Comparing Cost Estimates for the Kyoto Protocol," <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/kyoto/cost.html> (Accessed 7/24/2007)

of climate change. It is important to note that each new iteration of the report reduces the likely range of impacts, most notably the reduction in estimates on change in ocean level to about 13 inches over the next 100 years.

While much has changed in the ten years since Senator Murray joined a unanimous Senate voting against the principles of the Kyoto Treaty, the concerns raised in that resolution remain at the forefront of the debate. Any future strategy that does not learn the lessons of the Kyoto Treaty's failure is also likely to fail to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.