

Emissions impossible?

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So because Russia is a northern country, if it warms up a degree or two it's not terrible. Or is it?

Have you ever spent any time in a Russian city in winter?

Russia is a large country so would experience flooding in the lower reaches of its many river floodplains as a result of sea level rise associated with global warming but on balance perhaps, domestically at least, Russia

admits that it sees more benefits than problems to projected climate changes resulting from global warming.

Perhaps this gives us an insight into why talks at the recent World Climate Change Conference in Moscow ended without a result. It was widely hoped that host country Russia, would sign the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

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The Kyoto Protocol aims to cut greenhouse gas production to just over 5% below 1990 levels by 2007. It was agreed by member states in 1997 but is yet to be ratified (take legal effect). Although 61 countries have ratified the agreement to date, their combined greenhouse gas production is not yet 55% of the total emissions from industrialised countries. A minimum of 55% is required for the agreement to take legal effect and currently only around 44% of emissions are accounted for.

Many believe that with the USA effectively out of the equation after withdrawing from the agreement in 2001, Russia now holds the Key to Kyoto. As long as Russia remains outside of the agreement the Protocol cannot take legal effect. However, along with the USA and Australia, Russia is worried if it can afford, economically, to sign the agreement. Russia argues that since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the closure of traditional, inefficient heavy industries, emissions have fallen by 30% anyway. This means that effectively Russia has emissions credits which it can trade for money with other countries that produce more than the amount of emissions allowed by the Protocol. These lucrative emissions credits will be wiped out by its own planned and burgeoning economic growth that is required to bring the standard of living in Russia to a comparable level enjoyed by other industrialised nations.

Whichever way you look at the problem of emissions trading, future energy and that means electricity and gas will become more expensive for everyone. If an energy producer uses 'dirty' generation techniques then they will have to incorporate into their costs the financial penalties (of buying extra emission credits, from say, Russia). Cleaner forms of generation such as fuel-efficient gas-fired plant

are more attractive but renewable energy generation such as wind farms can be almost three times more expensive to operate than fossil fuel plants and could become uneconomic without the carbon emission trading scheme.

So why doesn't Russia sign up to Kyoto? President Putin may be waiting for offers of investment, natural-gas sales, and emissions-credit sales - mainly from the EU - to sign the treaty. From the USA he may be expecting offers of investment and trade-offs on other issues - such as Russian sales of nuclear technology to Iran - to persuade him to at least delay his decision further. The latter seems to have worked this time. We will have to wait until December for the UN Climate Change talks in Milan to find out what happens next.