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G8 Recognizes Need to Act on Super Greenhouse Gases, Considers More Aggressive Stance on CO₂

Washington, D.C., July 8, 2009 – As the Group of Eight began discussions on targets for reducing climate emissions, talk was circulating of a possible commitment to limit warming to 2°C. If the G8 comes to this conclusion, it will be a significant step forward for climate mitigation. The only way to meet these goals however, will be to pursue fast and big cuts in both CO₂ emissions, which are causing half of the warming, and non-CO₂ emissions which are causing the other half. Hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) emissions for example, are predicted to be up to 45 % of CO₂ emissions by 2050 under a 2°C scenario to stabilize CO₂ at 450 ppm. Other non-CO₂ emissions include black carbon aerosols, methane, and tropospheric ozone.

Low-lying island states led by the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Mauritius have proposed phasing down HFC production and consumption under the Montreal Protocol ozone treaty. “This treaty is responsible for creating HFCs, and this treaty has the expertise, the experience and the responsibility to eliminate these super greenhouse gases,” said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development. “These HFCs have global warming potentials of up to 14,800 times greater than CO₂.” FSM has asked the U.S. to support its proposal to phase down HFCs with high global warming potentials.

“We welcome the news that the U.S. and the rest of the G8 countries are voicing support for more ambitious climate targets,” said Amb. Yosiwo George, FSM Ambassador to the U.S. “Island nations and other vulnerable states depend on this strong leadership to help avoid the devastating effects of abrupt climate change that are sure to occur without aggressive action on both CO₂ and other emissions such as HFCs. We hope this leadership will translate into support for FSM and Mauritius’ proposal to phase down HFCs under the Montreal Protocol.” The Montreal Protocol negotiations open next week in Geneva and conclude the first week of November in Egypt.

FSM along with the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, and the Republic of the Fiji Islands, sent a letter to President Obama several weeks ago requesting U.S. support of the FSM and Mauritius proposal and emphasizing the importance of addressing HFCs immediately: “Even if developed countries made significant mid-term cuts in CO₂ emissions, the continued growth of HFCs globally could trigger near-term abrupt climate changes that would destroy our way of life, our homes, and displace our populations.”

Congressmen Waxman and Markey also sent a letter to President Obama requesting that the Administration support amending the Montreal Protocol to phase down these super greenhouse gases, as did Senators Boxer and Kerry. The Waxman-Markey climate bill that recently passed the House phases down HFCs under a separate title. According to sources, the G8 will recognize the importance of phasing down HFCs and reducing black carbon emissions:

“We recognize that the accelerated phase-out of HCFCs mandated under the Montreal Protocol is leading to a rapid increase in the use of HFCs, many of which are very potent GHGs. Therefore we will work with our partners to ensure that HFC emissions reductions are achieved under the appropriate framework. We are also committed to taking rapid action to address other significant climate forcing agents, such as black carbon. These efforts, however, must not draw away attention from ambitious and urgent cuts in emissions from other, more long-lasting, greenhouse gases, which should remain the priority.”

“An early victory that takes out a piece of the climate problem that would be 45% of CO₂ emissions by 2050 would provide great momentum going into Copenhagen,” added Zaelke.

Climate negotiators are just beginning to realize that half of global warming is caused by CO₂ and the other half by non-CO₂ emissions. The non-CO₂ half of climate change is also the fast half. HFCs, black carbon, methane, and tropospheric ozone have short atmospheric lifetimes ranging from hours to days, up to a decade and a half. Reducing this half of climate emissions can produce fast cooling and is an essential complement to cuts in CO₂. These fast action non-CO₂ strategies, as well as expanding biosequestration through better forest management and expanded production of biochar, are the only ways to meet the commitment to keep climate warming under 2°C.

The Alliance of Small Island States have called for an even more ambitious climate target of keeping warming below 1.5°C to avoid passing the temperature tipping points for abrupt climate change which would cause severe sea level rise and devastate their island nations.

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