

Update on the Bonn Negotiations

June 12, 2009

Response to the Talks:

“Although the Bonn talks moved ahead in terms of process, many countries’ level of ambition here is dangerously low. Unfortunately, Canada’s role continued to be predominately negative. With Copenhagen less than 180 days away, Canada needs to change course urgently so that we can be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.”

Hugo Séguin, Équiterre and Clare Demerse, Pembina Institute

The backgrounder below provides updates on the major elements of the UN’s Bonn climate talks, which ended today.

1. Kyoto Protocol negotiation track fails to progress

Discussions on the negotiating track under the Kyoto Protocol (in UN parlance, the AWG-KP) failed to make any progress in Bonn. There were many sessions over two weeks on important topics, including what the overall aggregate target should be for developed countries for 2020, what year should be used to calculate those reductions from (1990 or other?), and how long the second (post-2012) commitment period should be. A decision was supposed to be made on developed countries’ aggregate target (the weighted average of the reductions that developed countries should be committing to). Determining this overall level of effort is the first logical step needed on the road to setting individual country targets that add up to the scale of emission reductions needed to avoid dangerous climate change.

The Kyoto negotiation track failed to make a decision on an aggregate target over the past two weeks. Furthermore, the options have not even been narrowed, and Canada’s “contribution” served to make the options more ambiguous.

With respect to the aggregate target, Canada insisted on keeping the option of “x% reductions by 2020” on the table. Japan was the only other country to support this option. This option is problematic not only because it’s undefined, but also because it acts as a placeholder for a target weaker than the weakest proposed numerical target of a reduction of 25% below the 1990 level by 2020. (This is the minimum target agreed to by Canada and over 170 other Kyoto countries in the 2007 Bali Action Plan, the document guiding these negotiations.) The most up-to-date scientific assessments suggest that keeping global average warming below 2 degrees Celsius requires emission cuts of more than 40% below 1990 by 2020 for developed countries.

Canada also proposed using a more recent base year than 1990, which would have the effect of “hiding” the growth in its its emissions since 1990. Canada also stated that it will not account for the emissions from its forests unless countries agree to rules that are more favourable to Canada. The EU-27 and the 42-member Alliance of Small Island States both rebuked Canada for lacking ambition and for playing with the numbers to make its 2020 target look better than it is.

Not surprisingly, the conclusion from this negotiating session was extremely disappointing. On Thursday, when countries realized that there was no possibility of making any progress, meaningful negotiations ended. Countries failed to agree on a joint text, even one that included all the options, and Canada and Japan were the countries most responsible for this stalemate. Developing countries were not impressed by the lack of progress, and many vocally expressed their disappointment in the closing session.

Despite this failure to agree, numerous countries produced amended drafts of the Kyoto Protocol. This fulfilled an important process step, which is a deadline of tabling legal text six months before the end of the Copenhagen meeting this December.

There will be three more negotiating sessions between now and the Copenhagen meeting, with the next one taking place in Bonn in August. The time remaining is very short given the amount of work left to be done. Progress must happen much more quickly than it did over the last two weeks to have a chance of forging a strong agreement in Copenhagen. Developing countries have stated that progress in the other negotiating track, where actions from developing countries will be agreed to, will not progress so long as industrialized countries block forward movement in the Kyoto track.

2. Long-Term Cooperative Action (LCA) track

The Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the Convention (AWG LCA) is one of the two main negotiation tracks working towards a Copenhagen agreement. It includes negotiations on a “shared vision” of achieving future emission reductions and the four “building blocks” that countries identified in 2007 as the key elements of an agreement: reducing emissions (mitigation), adaptation, financing, and technology transfer/capacity building.

Just before the Bonn session started, the LCA chair produced a negotiation text based on countries’ submissions. During the first week in Bonn, countries provided general comments on that text, and in the second week they submitted new text to the chair’s draft. The operating principle of the session was that countries could only add, not take away - and the result was that a 53-page document will likely become more than 200 pages long when the chair puts all the additions together. However, countries have already signalled problems with many aspects of the text, and a lot of fault lines have been identified.

Countries will meet in Bonn again in August to start really working through the expanded text by combining ideas, deleting them, or drafting new additions.

Canada did submit new text related to adaptation, technology and mitigation, but those have not been made public. Canada also committed to provide its "fair share" of financial support for climate action in developing countries. However, Department of Foreign Affairs briefing notes obtained through Access to Information legislation indicate that Canada "seeks to leverage financial and technological assistance to extract binding emissions reduction commitments from the emerging economies," an unconstructive position that runs counter to Canada's legal obligation (under the UN climate convention) to provide this financial support. The briefing note cited dates from 2008.

3. Next Steps for Canada

In order to restore credibility and make a constructive contribution in Copenhagen, Canada needs to dramatically strengthen its level of ambition on climate policy. The two most important policy changes needed are:

- Adopting a far stronger national emission reduction target that aims to reduce Canada's greenhouse gas pollution to the levels that scientists tell us are needed to avoid dangerous climate change. A national target for Canada will only be credible if it is backed up by a convincing plan to meet it. The centrepiece of that plan would be a price on greenhouse gas emissions implemented through regulations.
- Providing our fair share of climate financing. A range of estimates show that tens of billions of dollars in new public financing will be needed to support mitigation and adaptation in poorer countries, and new analysis from the Pembina Institute shows that Canada's contribution would be about 3-4% of the total. Using conservative estimates, Canada's "fair share" works out to approximately \$2-6 billion per year.

As it stands, Canada is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Canadians want to see Canada contribute to a success in Copenhagen. The conclusions of the UN climate talks is now less than 180 days away, so Canada needs to change course with urgency.

4. NGOs write their own Copenhagen agreement

On a more positive note, a coalition of environmental groups released a document entitled A Copenhagen Climate Treaty. This treaty proposes the actual legal text for a strong and equitable Copenhagen agreement.

The legal structure of this treaty would include an amended Kyoto Protocol and a new Copenhagen Protocol. The document also lays out the reductions needed from developed countries, the actions needed from developing countries to curb emissions and adapt to changes, and the funding and technology support that developed countries would deliver to developing countries. Canadians Claire Stockwell and Dale Marshall contributed to the project.

5. Fossil of the Day Awards

Canada had also “won” several Fossil of the Day Awards during the Bonn negotiations. Their consistently unhelpful role also made Canada a shared winner of the Bonn “Colossal Fossil” award, along with 3 other countries: Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. Canada’s Fossil track record is reproduced below, with the reasons for the award cited as well.

Monday, June 1

2nd place: for suggesting that “all Parties” should undertake all actions under the Bali Action Plan, including 2020 reduction targets.

Wednesday, June 3

2nd place: with Australia and Japan, for resisting a discussion on the scale of emission reductions in Tuesday’s contact group on scale of emission reductions.

Friday, June 5

Honourable Mention: supported by Japan for insisting that the option of x% below 1990 by 2020 be considered as an option for an aggregate target for developed countries. Since targets already on the table range from -25% to -79%, the Canadian option is having a target weaker than the science-based range laid down by the IPCC.

Saturday, June 6

2nd place: with Australia and Japan for resisting a discussion on the scale of emission reductions in Tuesday’s contact group on scale of emission reductions. Yes, the rules matter, and other contact groups are discussing some of those. However, one would think (and hope) that countries that have not yet actually reduced emissions might at least believe it’s time to discuss future targets.

Monday, June 8

3rd place: for a speech from Environment Minister Jim Prentice in which he said that Canada’s goal in these negotiations is to “move past Kyoto”. He also described Copenhagen as being the place where “the world will turn the page on Kyoto.” Note to Canada: umm, these negotiations are actually about Kyoto. Just because you decided to walk away from your Kyoto promise doesn’t mean the rest of the world agrees with you.