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Climate treaty 'puts US growth at risk'

By Fiona Harvey, Environment Correspondent

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The gulf between the US and Europe on climate change yawned as wide as ever on Thursday after Washington told an international conference that limiting carbon emissions in line with the Kyoto protocol on climate change would damage growth.

Harlan Watson, senior climate negotiator for the US State Department, told the meeting of signatories in Buenos Aires that the treaty's success would depend on "whether or not the Kyoto parties will be willing to take on what we believe would be non-growth economic policies".

This stands in direct opposition to the European Union, which will implement its scheme to limit industrial emissions of carbon dioxide in January, and the UK, which has taken a strong stand on climate change.

Tony Blair has discussed climate change with President George W. Bush on several occasions, but has made little progress. Mr Blair's office on Thursday confirmed that Kyoto remained the cornerstone of its approach: "We remain committed to Kyoto, and the need for a cohesive international [treaty]."

Paula Dobriansky, US under-secretary of state, told the Financial Times: "We think that we share a common commitment to dealing with climate change, but there are different approaches."

She outlined a number of initiatives the Bush administration had undertaken to combat climate change, including financing for the Earth Observation Summit, a system for monitoring changes in the global environment.

The US, which has refused to ratify the Kyoto protocol, spends \$5bn (€3.75bn, £2.58bn) a year on related science and technology projects, including work on "clean coal" and alternative fuels such as hydrogen.


"One of the areas we can collaborate on to make a difference is in science and modelling," she said.

Ms Dobriansky said this research would be vital for helping people adapt to the effects of climate change the theme of this year's Kyoto protocol meeting.




But critics argue the best US response would be to join the United Nations-brokered protocol. Jonathan Lash, president of the World Resources Institute, said: "[The administration] has a pretty discouraging record, and we have not seen anything in the month since the election to suggest any change in direction."

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The White House was on Thursday mulling its response to a bipartisan report from the National Commission on Energy Policy, which recommended a mandatory system of tradeable permits to limit greenhouse emissions and a tightening of fuel efficiency standards for vehicles.

Even this option would fall far short of what would be involved in ratifying Kyoto.

"The US is the lone major emitter among developed nations that has not pledged to reduce greenhouse gases. The result is that Europe believes the US is willing to risk the health of the world for the sake of its economic hegemony," conceded Paul Bledsoe, director of strategy for the National Commission on Energy Policy.

Additional reporting by Christopher Swann



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