

'Testing time' for EU climate policy

By David Miliband, Cristina Narbona and Janez Podobnik

18 February 2007

Tuesday's meeting of European environment ministers in Brussels will be a test of our continent's commitment to tackling climate change. We can all justifiably be proud that last week saw the second anniversary of the start of the Kyoto Protocol; the first ever international treaty with legally binding targets to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

But we all know that the current Kyoto deal does not go far enough.

If we are going to avoid the dangerous impacts of climate change - both here in Europe, but also on those countries least able to cope with its devastating consequences - then the EU must stand up and lead the debate on committing to further action to tackle climate change.

As EU ministers, we can rightly welcome the advancement brought about by Kyoto - real action to tackle greenhouse gas emissions and the establishment of a flourishing global market in carbon, worth over 7.6bn euros (£5.1bn) in 2005.

The EU's emissions trading scheme is already well underway, with the UK and Spain already key players in the scheme. Slovenia's National Allocation Plan for Phase II was one of the first to be endorsed by the commission. We are keen to work with colleagues to support the development of a truly global carbon market with the full participation of major emitters.

Kyoto's aim is simple: to put the world on course to cut its carbon and so avoid the dangerous climate change so increasingly feared. But we all know that more needs to be done.

The recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is yet further evidence of the reality of climate change and makes clear that urgent action is necessary to halt emissions. It is also clear to us that climate action must start here at home. In our own homes, we can reduce the amount of energy we use to save money and the environment, and in our countries businesses are now trading carbon and accounting for their emissions.

So it is now up to governments acting as a European, and environmental, union to stand up and commit to serious climate action.

Of course, the climate change challenge will not be solved solely by the actions of the European Union. But we are 27 countries and over 490 million people. And in 2004, these 27 countries emitted over 6,000 million tonnes of greenhouse gases.

We do therefore have a responsibility to cut our own emissions. That's why the EU should not back away from committing unilaterally to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% by 2020 - to demonstrate the seriousness with which we view this threat and to put us on a path towards a low-carbon economy.

In fact, we want and need to go further. As part of an international agreement, the EU should agree to reduce its emissions by a further 10% - so a 30% cut in emissions by 2020 if others follow us.

In order to ensure fairness, a differentiated approach to the contributions of member states is needed, taking into account criteria including relevant socio-economic parameters such as emissions per capita, emissions per GDP, economic structures, mitigation potential of important sectors and competitiveness of industries.

The analysis is clear that such a target is feasible and possible. Indeed, the recent Stern Review on the economics of climate change concludes that tackling climate change is both achievable and affordable, yet the costs of inaction are greater than those of action.

The fact that the EU's proposed energy strategy so closely interlinks climate change and energy security shows that they are two sides of the same coin. A bold energy and climate strategy should be underpinned by an ambitious target on greenhouse gases, and supported by challenging goals for increasing the development and deployment of renewables and other forms of low-carbon generation and energy efficiency.

Global carbon markets will play a key role in stimulating investment in these technologies, in particular in the developing world through mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism. Carbon Capture and Storage will also be an important technology in helping us to meet our climate change objectives and we share the commission's ambition to see all new fossil fuel power stations fitted with CCS by 2020 and therefore urge the Commission to press ahead quickly with the work assessing the practicality of this.

But this is not the end game. The ultimate objective for us all must be an effective global agreement on climate change - one that includes the US, China, India as well as Latin America.

Spain, for example, is making a big effort in working with Latin America through the Iberamerican Climate Change Network - which is addressing climate change at a political level across the continent. In this context, the EU has a responsibility to demonstrate its leadership and commitment. Without such commitment, the global agreement we all need will slide further away from our grasp.

And now is the time for stepping forward. This year could potentially be a tipping point in the fight against climate change. The window of opportunity is closing rapidly and a strong EU voice is necessary to provide the catalyst for UN discussions on taking effective action to cut emissions.

This is a test case for the EU's appetite for tackling climate change. Failing to grasp this opportunity would have serious implications for further urgent progress - as well as for the credibility of the European Union as a strong and leading international environmental player.

It is not a question of feasibility; we have both the instruments and the policies to put the EU on track to a competitive low carbon economy. The question that remains is whether we have the political will.

David Miliband is the UK's environment secretary; Cristina Narbona is Spain's environment minister and Janez Podobnik is Slovenia's environment minister.