Battle Over IPCC Chair Renews Debate on U.S. Climate Policy

Global organizations rarely reach meaningful consensus. That makes even more remarkable the decade-long success of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in forging a common position on the science of global warming. But when scientists from around the world meet next week in Geneva to elect a new chair of the organization, that spirit of consensus will be sorely tested.

The challenge comes from the U.S. government’s decision to back an Indian engineer-economist rather than renominate an American atmospheric chemist. That action sets the stage for an international referendum on the Bush Administration’s position on climate change.

Senior researchers around the world fear that the U.S. move is part of a campaign to undermine the scientific credibility of IPCC, whose reports have shaped the global agenda on climate change. White House and State Department officials strenuously deny that charge, noting that they have nominated a respected U.S. scientist to lead a key IPCC working group. They say that the move to replace Robert Watson after one 5-year term (Science, 26 September 1997, p. 1916) is designed to improve relations with India and elevate a researcher from a developing country. Their candidate is Rajendra Pachauri, now vice chair, who has headed New Delhi’s private nonprofit Tata Energy Research Institute for 20 years. He was nominated by the Indian government.

The U.S. action has alarmed other member nations already irritated with President George W. Bush’s rejection of the Kyoto protocol. Representatives from a consortium of European countries as well as Brazil, South Africa, and several island nations say they will support Watson at the Geneva meeting, which begins 17 April. “A lot of governments say they will support me,” says Watson, chief scientist for the World Bank and a top environmental adviser in President Bill Clinton’s White House.

If Watson were reelected, it would be an embarrassing defeat for both the Bush Administration and the Indian government. To

White House Shakes Up U.S. Program

In the midst of a fight over who will lead the international group overseeing climate change research, the Bush Administration is quietly shifting oversight of the U.S. Global Change Research Program (GCRP) from a scientific steering group to the Commerce Department. Some researchers fear that the move could undermine the quality of the $1.7 billion effort.

The current program was set up in the early 1990s and embraces a half-dozen agencies such as NASA, the National Science Foundation, and the Environmental Protection Agency. An interagency office run by researchers coordinates those various programs. Last June, President George W. Bush urged a rethinking of the effort.

Bush’s science adviser John Marburger and Conrad Lautenbacher, chief of the Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, outlined the new plan at a meeting in Washington on 1 April. According to documents obtained by Science, a new organization called the climate change science program office would be headed by the assistant Commerce secretary for oceans and atmosphere—a political appointee. Meteorologist James Mahoney, most recently president of an environmental consulting firm, was sworn into the Commerce job last week.

The present GCRP would be subsumed under the new organization, and a parallel office for climate change technology would be run out of the Energy Department. Both offices would report to an interagency working group, which in turn would report to a committee chaired by the secretary of Commerce.

The current structure “is not the right design for producing policy recommendations,” says Marburger, who would manage the committee. Giving Commerce Secretary Don Evans oversight of the program will make it easier to convert research findings into policy recommendations, he says, adding that he expects the move will have only “modest impact” on the research itself. Others, however, worry that the move gives politicians too large a voice. “There is a potential perception that you could be tying science to the politics more closely,” says one of several U.S. government researchers who asked not to be identified. The Commerce Department’s main job, he noted, is to promote U.S. business, which typically opposes efforts to reduce greenhouse gases.

Marburger says Bush is sensitive to these concerns. “The president does not want to disrupt the present research program,” he says, noting a $40 million request in the 2003 budget to fill gaps in areas such as climate modeling.

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