

Copenhagen Accord: Framework for future climate pact is main win

By Guest Columnist

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Bob Doppelt

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The Copenhagen Accord that emerged from this month's United Nations climate summit is little more than a proclamation to keep talking.

President Barack Obama and other world leaders have tried to spin the outcome as a major success. He called it "not the end, but the beginning." That's mostly damage control. The summit was supposed to bring to an end a two-year period of intense negotiations, culminating in a binding international treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, the new accord merely keeps talks alive.

That itself is a success of sorts. At noon on the summit's final day the talks were completely gridlocked. Even an agreement to keep talking seemed doubtful.

However, spurred by pressure at home, such as a letter from more than two dozen major U.S. businesses, including Nike, to craft a strong climate deal, deft negotiations

led by Obama averted a disaster. As a result, the conference offered a glimmer of hope that a binding treaty could materialize in the future.

In the end, the signatories to the Copenhagen Accord agreed in principle to hold global temperature increases to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. This has been hailed a big step forward. But it doesn't really plow new ground. The European Union, the G-8 group of industrialized nations and many other nations have already settled on that temperature limit. The accord also fails to spell out the actions to achieve that goal.

Another supposed success of the accord is the promise by the big emitters, including China and the United States, to cut their emissions and list their reduction pledges on a global registry. But pledging is also not the same as doing. And, if nations submit the emission reductions they announced at the summit, we are in big trouble. A draft U.N. document marked "confidential" that was leaked at the summit indicated that the combined emission pledges offered there would commit the world to a frightening 5.4-degree temperature increase.

The failure to leave Copenhagen with a legally binding climate treaty magnifies the risks of global warming for Oregonians. At the summit's U.S. pavilion, Jane Lubchenco, former professor at Oregon State University and now administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, shared research showing that additional carbon dioxide being added to the atmosphere is rapidly increasing ocean acidification. One result is more frequent and extreme marine "dead zones" along the Oregon coast. Lost fisheries, along with the incomes and jobs they bring, are just some of the likely consequences.

A soon-to-be-released study sponsored by my program at the University of Oregon of the likely effects of climate change in the lower Willamette basin, including the Portland area, suggests that substantially higher temperatures, reduced snowpack, more wildfires and other effects are likely unless global emissions are rapidly reduced. These changes will alter the region's livability.

But it's not all gloom and doom. The accord -- just maybe -- provides a framework that could spur progress down the road. That's because it conceptually addresses some of the key deficiencies that caused the United States to reject the Kyoto Protocol in 2001.

One of the major points of contention for the U.S. with Kyoto, and at the summit, was the need for high-polluting "developing" nations such as China to commit to emission cuts. Kyoto does not require these so-called Annex II countries to do so. Now, all 17 of the major economies that contribute about 90percent of total global emissions

have pledged to limit their emissions.

To ensure a level global economic playing field, the Obama administration also was adamant that every nation, including China, tender its emission reductions to independent verification. In a compromise, the new accord says that Annex II nations will submit their plans to "international consultations and analysis."

Although by no means a sure thing, the fact that China put some skin in the game might grease the skids for U.S. Senate passage of a climate bill. This could allow the United States to enter into a future international treaty.

The Copenhagen Accord also acknowledges other important issues ignored by the Kyoto Protocol, such as the need to fund efforts in poor nations to cope with climate change, to finance programs to reduce deforestation and to address long-term emission reductions. This might turn many poor nations into active partners in future negotiations.

No one should think the new accord ensures significant progress. It mostly represents a frantic attempt by world leaders to have something to show their constituents when they returned home. But to their credit it also sows the seeds of a platform for potential meaningful long-term action on climate change.

Bob Doppelt is director of the Climate Leadership Initiative in the University of Oregon's Institute for a Sustainable Environment.

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