

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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How Important is the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference?

This month, 193 national delegations are gathering in Copenhagen for the U.N. Climate Change Conference. This is a follow-up to the 1997 meeting in Kyoto where the protocol by the same name was adopted and is set to expire in 2012. Continuing a worldwide effort to reduce carbon dioxide and other green house gas (GHG) emissions is extremely critical if we are to reduce global warming.

Usually, we think of global warming as having an impact on our weather by generating more storms, on melting ice caps, or drying of agricultural land. Last month, I had the opportunity to participate in a roundtable discussion with Lester Brown, founder of the World Watch Institute and the founder and president of the Earth Policy Institute. During his presentation, he related that the demise of earlier civilizations like the Mayan or Minoan were primarily due to the loss of food.

Brown discussed how global warming can have a similar effect on our food production. Unless we have a dramatic reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, the melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets will cause a six foot rise in the sea level by the end of this century. This would cause many countries, or parts of countries, to be submerged under water, and this would include New Orleans and most of Florida. We have had 18 consecutive years of melting glaciers, something that will have a major impact on food.

China is currently the leading producer of wheat in the world followed by India and the United States. Wheat production in China and India is irrigated in contrast to U.S. production. The disappearance of glaciers in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau are of concern because their ice melt sustains the flow of the major rivers of India and China, and these rivers sustain the irrigation systems. A leading scientist in China predicts that two-thirds of China's glaciers would be gone by 2050, and thus dramatically reducing wheat production. This would place a greater demand for U.S. exports and increase food prices in the U.S. dramatically. Brown indicated that we live in an integrated world food economy, one where harvest shortfalls anywhere can drive up food prices everywhere.

In a study published by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, an international team of scientists confirmed that for each one degree Celsius rise in temperature above the norm during the growing season, a ten percent decline in wheat and rice yields is expected. In a world with limited grain stocks, and being only one poor harvest away from chaos in grain markets, such a heat wave could lead to politically destabilizing food shortages.

Food production is just one of the critical dependents on the climate and its potential change. As I indicated in my July/August 2009 article, the Waxman-Markey bill, which was passed by the House of Representatives, is very weak and will not have much of an impact in controlling climate change. While it proposes to reduce our emissions by 2020 to levels 20% below 2005 levels, that is the same as reducing emissions by only 4% below 1990 levels – that proposed by the Kyoto Protocol. The Senate has not passed its version of a cap-and-trade bill, and as a result, the U.S. will be at the Copenhagen meeting without any program to reduce emissions. When the world's second largest emitter of GHG cannot adopt an emission reduction program, a timely international agreement is unlikely. It has already been predicted that this Copenhagen meeting will defer any international agreements until sometime in 2010, or possibly even later.

Some people feel that international agreements are obsolete in that no country wants to give in to a policy dictated by others. Also, ratification of international agreements can take up to five years, or even longer. For example, the Kyoto Protocol, passed in 1997, was still being ratified ten years later. If the Copenhagen agreement takes that long, we will already be in 2020 with, perhaps, little having been accomplished. Each country must take the position that it will assume its responsibility to curtail carbon emissions as quickly as possible and to levels that will have a positive impact on climate change. Only then will we have food security. Doing it later is too late!