



EU Kyoto doubts go public

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Officials are striking increasingly dissonant notes on the question of whether the EU should continue to support the Kyoto Protocol as a framework for UN agreements after 2012 if countries such as Japan, Russia and Canada maintain their opposition.

Speaking at the Lisbon Council Eco-Innovation Summit in Brussels today (13 January), Climate Action Commissioner Connie Hedegaard passionately warned her colleagues that it was easier to see the weaknesses of the Kyoto Protocol than the contours of any replacement deal.

"One should not think that if we just got rid of [Kyoto], we could easily build something new," she said. "It took ten years to build all the details in the international set up that we have now."

"That's why we say: 'Take care! Yes, it's very difficult to get an international legally binding deal. Yes, there are many charges to the Kyoto Protocol, but take care not to throw out what we have got already, unless you are sure that you can get something to replace it'."

Yesterday (12 January), Jos Debleke, director-general of the European Commission's climate department, gave a flavour of the debate now taking place behind closed doors when he said the EU needed a "reflection period" before deciding whether to back Kyoto in the future.

Answering a question from EurActiv, he clarified that the EU still fully supported the Kyoto agreement but noted that other countries had strongly opposed it at the Cancún summit last December.

"We have to digest this," he told a Worldwatch Institute debate.

"What is the added value of the EU finding itself alone in a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol when we know that Japan, China, the US and Russia are not going to join and it's only for developed countries?"

The Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012 and the issue of whether its framework should be used for a successor agreement has divided the international community.

No agreement was reached on the issue at the Cancún climate summit in December 2010 and Kyoto's future remains one of the thorniest issues in global environmental debates.

The EU's position has been that it would agree to a second commitment period so long as all other countries signed up to a parallel treaty containing binding emissions targets. But this may now be up for debate.

Artur Runge-Metzge, the EU's chief negotiator at Cancún, described the issue as "an important question" at a Centre for European Policy Studies debate later on 12 January. But he sounded a slightly more positive note on the Kyoto Protocol itself.

There had been good discussions in Cancún about "flaws" in the Kyoto Protocol such as land use change and forestry as well as surplus aid, he said in response to a question from EurActiv.

But he added that other countries also had to make commitments for Kyoto to remain viable. "I don't think the EU would be able to do it alone, where 10% of emissions are under an international legal framework and we don't really know how the other 90% are done."

"That would be a hard sell to my colleagues or even the International Emissions Trading Association (IETA). We would not agree in the Council or the European Parliament."

Dead man walking

At the same meeting, Henry Derwent, CEO of the IETA, described the Kyoto agreement as "a dead man walking". The IETA is an influential global business lobbying association on emissions trading.

Any possible weakening of the EU's commitment to Kyoto is sure to provoke anger in the developing world and among environmentalists closer to home.

"This is the wrong debate to be having right now," Bas Eickhout, a Dutch Green MEP, told EurActiv. "What the EU is doing is unhelpful. The right debate now is how to make sure that the clearer emissions reductions targets - which were part of the Kyoto track - will also become part of the next track."

"Whether there will be a second period of Kyoto, I would say that we should cross that bridge when we come to it."