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China gets serious about carbon emissions, global warming

At UN, China's Hu Jintao commits to measurable limits on carbon emissions for the first time. Chinese environmental activists hail the shift toward low-carbon technology.

By [Peter Ford](#) | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

BEIJING

The pledge that Chinese President Hu Jintao made at Tuesday's United Nations climate change summit in New York – to put the brakes on China's carbon dioxide emissions – may have been short on specifics.

Chinese environmentalists, though, are hailing it as an important sign that Beijing is now fully committed to the global crusade against greenhouse gases.

The Chinese leader "signaled a willingness to move forward the negotiations" on CO₂ curbs that are due to culminate in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December, Greenpeace China's climate expert Yang Ailun said here Wednesday. "This is a step in the right direction."

Mr. Hu promised that China would reduce its carbon intensity "by a notable margin by 2020 from 2005 levels." Carbon intensity is the amount of CO₂ produced for each unit of economic output.

Though Hu put no figure on the goal, this marked the first time that Beijing has committed to measurable limits on its greenhouse-gas emissions. A senior Chinese official said later that a firm target would be announced "soon."

"China is still waiting for developed countries to put forward their own proposals for technology transfer and financial aid," which developing countries say they need in order to keep building their economies with the least possible pollution, according to Alfred Deng, a policy analyst in Beijing with The Climate Group, an international climate-change watchdog.

"China won't take the first step," Mr. Deng adds. "It will depend on how much developed countries do."

WORLD'S LARGEST CO₂ PRODUCER

Hu's promise will not mean any cuts soon in the actual emissions from China, the world's largest CO₂ producer. The country has too many cities, railroads, bridges, and ports still to build in its push to employ millions of Chinese and develop its economy – and these projects require cement and steel from heavily polluting factories.

But government policies to reduce China's dependence on coal are already in place, and they need to be. "If the current mode of economic development drags on, the scale of China's fossil fuel consumption will be shocking," warned an influential report issued earlier this month by 10 Chinese institutions.

If energy consumption continued to grow at current rates until 2050, the report predicted, China would have burned more than 100 billion tons of coal by then, "far exceeding the load-bearing capacity of the whole planet."

If China invests heavily in renewable energy and receives generous aid from rich countries, its CO2 emissions could peak around 2035, said the report, the most comprehensive study ever done into China's possible low-carbon development paths. They would not begin to fall until the middle of the century.

To download a PDF summary of the report in English, [click here](#) .

BEIJING TAKES GLOBAL WARMING SERIOUSLY

Experts here are generally confident that the Chinese government has recently begun to take the threat of global warming seriously, and to adopt policies to address it. Beijing has already said it would increase energy efficiency by 20 percent between 2005 and 2010 and use renewable sources for 15 percent of its energy by 2020.

The government has set quotas and subsidies obliging utility companies to buy a certain proportion of their electricity from wind, solar, and hydro projects.

China has also planted more trees for each of the past two years than the rest of the world put together, partly in a bid to soak up CO2 in the atmosphere.

"Two years ago government officials would ask me why I was talking about a low-carbon future," recalls Yang Fuqiang, a climate change expert with the Worldwide Fund for Nature. "They said it was a foreign idea.

"Today officials are clear that China has to move to a low-carbon economy, there is no question about it," Mr. Yang adds. Last month, for the first time, a decree from the National People's Congress, China's parliament, used such concepts as a "low carbon economy" and a "green economy," he points out.

At the same time, a recent report from The Climate Group found, "China has taken the lead in the race to develop and commercialize a range of low carbon technologies."

"Investors here are not short of money," says Yang. "If the government sets targets and issues mandatory requirements, investors will move. The government just has to give clear signals."

For more on China's rapid push into solar and its "Green Leap Forward," [click here](#) .

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