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Kyoto to Copenhagen

Google 'Countdown to Copenhagen' and you will get about 400,00 hits. Why?

Most of us have linked climate change with Kyoto, Japan, where most of the countries around the world met in 1997 to establish the Kyoto Protocol, a framework for reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. The good news is that as of February 2009, 183 countries signed and ratified the agreement. The bad news is that global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. The general Kyoto target was to reduce emissions by about 5% by now, relative to 1990 levels.

The next United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) happens between December 7 and 18 in Copenhagen, Denmark, 50 days from today. Hence, the 'Countdown to Copenhagen'. Thousands of groups and millions of people around the world are raising awareness of the need for real results in Copenhagen. Why?

It is generally agreed upon in the scientific community that we need to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by about 80% by 2050, so that we do not exceed a global temperature increase of more than 2 degrees Celsius. Yes, you read that right, 80% reduction over the next 40 years.

To get to 80% means more than just walking to the store more often, changing a light bulb, or buying a hybrid. Technology may be the easy part of the solution, including dramatic changes in the way we generate electricity, such as more wind, solar, carbon capture and perhaps nuclear energy. Technology changes include how we power our vehicles and mass transit. Technology can help us become more energy efficient in the way we heat and light our homes and workplaces. That's the easy stuff (oh, and by the way, billions of dollars will be generated by commercializing these needed technologies).

If technology is the easy part, what is the hard part? Human and political will – that's the hard part!

The politics and negotiations at Copenhagen will be akin to a soap opera. There will be a multitude of story lines and alliances during the nearly two week convention. Generally countries will agree that we need to reduce emissions substantially over the next 40 years, but challenges will include who takes the true global leadership role; how China and India respond; and what will the poor countries (generally those most affected by climate change) ask of the developed nations for aid over the next few decades.

In the spirit of sports prognostications, let me offer up a few of my own. On the media coverage: the conference will get major media play around the world, more so in Europe than North America. We will likely get some media play on December 6 and 7, it will dip during the conference, and will be heightened on December 17, 18 and 19.

On the dynamic: the public will be exposed to daily updates on which countries are taking the lead and which are dragging their feet. In fact, at Bali in 2007, Canada tied the United States at 25 for the most

'Fossil of the Day Awards' for dragging their feet. China and India will likely lobby for more leadership from the developed countries than themselves. President Obama will arrive in Copenhagen around December 17 and call for global unity in addressing the issue. Forty-eight hours of intense negotiations will happen following his speech, resulting in a final number and timing being released by the negotiators in the early morning of December 19.

On the result: hopefully an agreement to drop emissions by about 80% over the next four decades, likely with interim targets along the way and, again, hopefully, an agreement to establish some kind of binding process to hold countries accountable who do not meet the obligations to the global community.

There is a good chance that you will be approached by email, mail or in person over the next few weeks to sign a petition or commitment to demand that our government or the governments of the world commit to being part of the real solution. If so, I ask that you do play a role in sending a message. Even your individual message, when combined with millions of others around the world, is an important one!

Peter Corbyn is a co-founder of GreenNexus.com and a board member of The Climate Project – Canada.