

EPA head: US must make up for lost time on climate

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US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson gestures during a briefing in the U.S. center at the UN Climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2009. The head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says she will take commonsense steps to regulate carbon emissions to protect the health of Americans. (AP Photo/Anja Niedringhaus)

(AP) -- The top U.S. environmental official told a divided U.N. climate conference Wednesday that the Obama administration's moves to "make up for lost time" and cut greenhouse gases would complement congressional action and wasn't intended to bypass recalcitrant lawmakers.

The comments by Environmental Protection Agency chief Lisa Jackson came on the same day that the tiny Pacific island nation of Tuvalu - which would be among the first victims of rising seas - was rebuffed by

the conference in an attempt to demand strong action against major polluting countries.

Jackson suggested the EPA's decision Monday that greenhouse gases should be regulated would be a dual path of action by the Obama administration and Congress.

"This is not an either/or moment. This is a both/and moment," she told more than 100 people who packed a U.S. meeting room in the conference center.

The EPA determined Monday that scientific evidence clearly shows they are endangering the health of Americans, and that the pollutants - mainly carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels - should be regulated under the Clean Air Act. That means the EPA could regulate those gases without the approval of Congress.

The EPA decision was welcomed by other nations in Copenhagen that have called on the U.S. to boost its efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions, because it seemed President Barack Obama could act more quickly and bypass legislation slowly working through Congress.

The full Senate has yet to take up legislation that cleared its environment committee and calls for greenhouse gases to be cut by 20 percent by 2020, a target that was scaled back to 17 percent in the House after opposition from coal-state Democrats.

"We have been fighting to make up for lost time," Jackson said, referring to the Bush administration's rejection of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which limited the greenhouse emissions of industrial countries.

Jackson said "we need legislation" to remove any uncertainty that businesses might have.

"The reason for legislation is to take that question out of their minds," she said. "We will work closely with our Congress to pass legislation to lower our greenhouse gases more than 80 percent by 2050."

The U.S. intends to make "reasonable efforts" and also "meaningful, common-sense steps" to cut emissions, Jackson said, without giving specifics.

U.S. business groups have strongly argued against tackling global warming through the Clean Air Act, saying it is less flexible and more costly than the cap-and-trade legislation being considered by Congress. Any regulations from the EPA are certain to spawn lawsuits and a lengthy legal fights.

Negotiators at the 192-nation U.N. conference in Copenhagen are working to bridge the chasm between rich and poor countries over how to share the burden of fighting climate change.

Tuvalu proposed amending the U.N. climate treaty to require the world's nations to keep the rise in temperatures to below 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. Rich countries have set 2 degrees C (3.6 degrees F) as a target.

The Danish conference president, Connie Hedegaard, declined to advance Tuvalu's proposal, after objections from other nations, including oil producers, who would be hurt by the required strict limits on burning fossil fuels. Consensus is needed for taking such actions.

Tuvalu and other low-lying oceanic nations will be the first victims of rising seas, as warmer temperatures make oceans expand, melt glaciers and create more extreme weather.

"Our future rests on the outcome of this meeting," said Tuvalu delegate

Ian Fry.

Getting an agreement that satisfies both rich and poor nations would not be easy, said Todd Stern, the top U.S. climate envoy. "But I think an agreement is there to be had if we do this right," he added.

Lumumba Di-Aping of Sudan, the head of the 135-nation bloc of developing countries, said the \$10 billion a year that has been proposed to help poor nations fight climate change paled in comparison to the more than \$1 trillion already spent to rescue financial institutions.

"If this is the greatest risk that humanity faces, then how do you explain \$10 billion?" he said. "Ten billion will not buy developing countries' citizens enough coffins."

Small island nations, poor countries and those seeking money from the developed world to preserve their tropical forests were among those upset over competing draft texts attributed to Denmark and China outlining proposed outcomes for the historic summit, which runs through Dec. 18. China has recently overtaken the U.S. as the world's top greenhouse gas emitter.

Some of the poorest nations feared they would bear too much of the burden to curb greenhouse gases. They are seeking billions of dollars in aid from the wealthy countries to deal with climate change, which melts glaciers that raise sea levels worldwide, turns some regions drier and threatens food production.

In Bangladesh, the country's junior environment minister, Hasan Mahmud, said it deserves at least 15 percent of the money that rich nations pledge to any global fund on climate change because the low-lying nation of 150 million is particularly vulnerable. Mahmud said he has no idea how much will be pledged, but "we hope to get at least \$5

billion over the next five years to fight the effects of climate change."

Diplomats from developing countries and climate activists complained the Danish hosts pre-empted the negotiations with their draft proposal, which would allow rich countries to cut fewer emissions while poorer nations would face tougher limits on greenhouse gases and more conditions on getting funds.

"When a process is flawed, then the outcome is flawed," Raman Mehta, ActionAid's program manager in India, said of the Danish proposal. "If developing countries don't have a concrete indication of the scale of finances, then you don't get a deal - and even if you do, it's a bad deal."

A sketchy counterproposal attributed to China would extend the Kyoto Protocol, which required 37 industrial nations to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases blamed for global warming by an average 5 percent by 2012, compared with 1990 levels.

The Chinese text would incorporate specific new, deeper targets for the industrialized world for a further five to eight years. However, developing countries including China would be covered by a separate agreement that encourages taking action to control emissions but not in the same legally binding way.

Poorer nations believe the two-track approach would best preserve the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" recognized under Kyoto.

Also on Wednesday, China strongly protested a blunder that prevented a top diplomat from entering the vast Bella Center where the U.N. conference is being held.

Su Wei, the director general of China's climate change negotiation team,

told the meeting he was "extremely unhappy" that a Chinese minister was barred from entry three days in a row.

Su called the incident "unacceptable" and expressed anger that U.N. climate chief Yvo de Boer was not informed. De Boer pledged to investigate and "make sure it doesn't happen again."

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