

Europe to turn up heat on climate targets

March 6 2011, by Christian Spillmann



Two men stand at the windows of a solar panel covered rooftop at the Inter Solar trade fair in Munich in June last year. Fresh from the launch of a trillion-euro bid to slash dependency on Middle East oil and Russian gas, Europe sets out this week its most ambitious targets yet to offset climate change.

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The European Union, home to half a billion people and some 20 million companies, is committed to going "green" between now and 2050 as part of passionate moves to save the planet from global warming.

However, making the leap from promise to fulfillment looks sure to be a painful process requiring politically difficult choices by national leaders.

On Tuesday, the European Commission, the powerful EU executive, unveils its roadmap for driving action to mitigate climate change,

demanding that the key farming, transport and construction sectors step up the plate.

Denmark's Connie Hedegaard is the woman handed one of the most thankless tasks in Brussels politics -- trying to pilot proposals through a crippling dependency on oil and gas imports, deep social instability in north Africa and potentially the Middle East as well as public suspicion of leaders' number one 'clean energy' preference, nuclear power.

"It's the start of ambitious forward planning -- the stakes are enormous with huge choices to be made in terms of technologies," admits an EU negotiator.

The commission's proposals, to cover the decades between 2020 and 2050, should be taken hand in hand with last month's decision by governments to announce a broad sweep of market reforms, linking national and regional electricity grids and [gas pipelines](#) by 2014.

The idea there was to allow power to circulate freely and cheaply, from those who produce it and have surpluses to those who do not but need it -- with [energy efficiency](#) a core doctrine.

The other big change was to re-position domestically-produced nuclear energy at the heart of the bloc's long-term supplies.

The attraction of low-emission nuclear generation was clear for leaders who also want to be seen to reduce [carbon emissions](#) despite deadlock at a global level on how, where and when to implement the cuts most scientists still say are required.



The sarcophagus over destroyed 4th block of Chernobyl power plant, pictured last month ahead of next month's 25th anniversary of the meltdown of reactor number four. Fresh from the launch of a trillion-euro bid to slash dependency on Middle East oil and Russian gas, Europe sets out this week its most ambitious targets yet to offset climate change.

But radical additional measures are also needed if the EU is to deliver, ranging from new rules for transport to a tax on carbon emissions and inefficient 'old' energy consumption.

Hedegaard's plans are expected to cost an estimated 270 billion euros (380 billion dollars) per year if the historic switchover is to become a reality -- and the budget can hardly be expected to come down.

The 27-state EU is already committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80-95 percent of 1999 levels by 2050 in a bid to keep global warming within a two degrees Celsius threshold deemed attainable and safe by governments.

This target must be met "by the EU, in the EU", says the forthright commissioner, one of the EU administration's most engaging figures.

A target of a 20 percent reduction by 2020 has been all-but achieved, due to strict demands placed on heavy industry and electricity producers in particular.

But going further and faster will be an especially delicate task, focused on agriculture, transport and construction.

These key sectors have scarcely been implicated -- beyond voluntary contributions -- in existing moves to cut emissions, and will respectively have to bring about reductions of up to 49, 67 and 91 percent.



Two technicians from offshore wind power farm "Alpha Ventus" stand on a boat off the northern German Island of Borkum in April last year. Fresh from the launch of a trillion-euro bid to slash dependency on Middle East oil and Russian gas, Europe sets out this week its most ambitious targets yet to offset climate change.

Between them, these areas are responsible for 60 percent of the 4.9 million tonnes of CO₂ spewed out currently by the EU each year.

The commission wants binding targets imposed in 2013, just as it wants to enforce targeted energy efficiency savings of 20 percent by 2020 -- currently, the level is only half the goal.

Governments are reluctant to make such commitments at a time when the worldwide race for economic recovery means every competitive inch is guarded jealously.

Hence, the re-wording of nuclear as "safe and sustainable low-carbon technologies", at the request of France and strongly backed by Britain.

Germany, Italy and Spain have already cut state aid allocated towards developing renewable energy sources and others can be expected to follow suit.

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