

UK takes action over greenhouse gasses

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BBC: In contrast to Canada's "do nothing" stance, the UK government has announced tougher limits on greenhouse gas emissions to meet its Kyoto targets following pressure from the European Commission.

UK climbs down over climate

By Richard Black

BBC Environment Correspondent

The UK government has announced tougher limits on greenhouse gas emissions following pressure from the European Commission.

The announcement will enable UK firms to join fully with the fledgling European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), a key component in EU plans to combat global warming.

It may also allow the government to avoid a damaging political row at an electorally sensitive time.

Under the ETS, every EU member state has to set a limit - a National Allocations Plan (NAP) - on the amount of carbon dioxide which its industrial plants can produce during the next three years.

Each government must then divide up this limit between the companies involved, each company receiving an "allowance", which it can trade with other companies at a rate set by the market.

The aim is to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in a business-friendly fashion.

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Energy demand

Britain published what it called a "draft" figure in April; the government calculated that during the period 2005-7, UK companies involved in the scheme should produce no more than 736 million tonnes of CO₂.

With some small caveats, the European Commission approved the plan.

Then, in October, the government revised its limit upwards, to 756 million tonnes; the reason, said Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett, was that forecasts of Britain's energy demand had changed - the country would need more energy in the next three years, and so would need to produce more CO₂.

Environmental groups accused the government of caving in to demands from big business, and the Commission was clearly not convinced that the UK, alone among EU countries, had a case for raising its emissions cap.

The result has been a stand-off, which the Commission has clearly won; the government has gone back to its original figure of 736 million tonnes, though it aims to take legal action against the Commission.

Expensive electricity

Environmental groups have welcomed the move.

"We are delighted that the government has re-introduced proposals for sensible cuts in UK carbon dioxide levels," said Friends of the Earth climate campaigner Bryony Worthington.

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"Tony Blair has promised to put climate change at the top of the international agenda; and undermining EU plans to cut carbon dioxide is the wrong way to go about achieving this."

The electricity industry will be most affected by the change to the NAP - it will have to cut all of the extra 20 million tonnes of CO₂.

"We are naturally disappointed, but not surprised," the chief executive of the Association of Electricity Producers, David Porter, told BBC News.

"Electricity will be more expensive as a result."

The government has made much of its stated commitment to combating climate change, and has won plaudits from environmental groups for its stance.

It may have been unwilling, at a time when a general election is anticipated, to see the UK cast as the country obstructing European attempts to tackle global warming.

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