Too hot in this kitchen

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The temptation will be to lament that the Bali climate conference produced only an agreement to talk some more for two years about climate change and the dire threat that poses to Earth and humankind.

Though there were genuine breakthroughs, we should succumb to the temptation.

We share much of the world's preference for an agreement that would have set clear targets for emissions reductions now, with the United States not acting as obstructionist.

The conference did, however, bring the U.S. into the fold after years of Luddite-like self-isolation on the issue. The U.S. did agree to be an active partner in developing a new international climate treaty by 2009. And it also agreed last weekend that developing nations should be compensated for pushing their own emission cuts.

This is the right thing to do for the U.S., the nations that make up the European Union and Russia, in particular. That's because they've been the major contributors of the gases warming the globe over the past decades. This is not about blame; it's about responsibility.

Yes, China is on track to overtake the U.S. as the major contributor, and India is coming up quick. The theory behind the help they'd get is that asking them to cut their emissions while playing catch-up economically - without compensation - essentially acts as disincentive for either to ever make those sacrifices. But if the U.S. should step up because it has been a major polluter, China in particular cannot ask the world to suffer while it becomes a bigger one. We're way beyond that. China must get serious about the environment.

The other developing nations got an agreement for technology transfers and help in dealing with climate change's effect. There was notably an agreement to address deforestation as well.

The Bali agreement calls for "measurable, reportable and verifiable nationally appropriate mitigation commitments or actions" for developed nations yet, at U.S. insistence, doesn't set specific international goals or targets.

This occurred as one delegate, capturing the mood of most of the rest of the world - including the European Union - told the U.S. to essentially get out of the way. The problem: As a major contributor to the problem, it cannot and should not.

The Bush administration lately has changed its tune on this, but that's after years of foot-dragging. Congress has stepped up with an energy bill that sets higher mileage standards for cars, but it, too, punted on renewable energy and on ending the giveaways to the energy industry.

The silver lining is that the U.S. is now working with other countries on an international treaty. The Bush administration must participate in all seriousness. It must not simply leave the heavy lifting for the next president.

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