

The 11 o'clock president

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

President George W. Bush has been slow to accept the realities of global warming or take action to combat it. He began his presidency by rejecting the Kyoto treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. While scientific evidence accumulated and international pressure mounted to cap carbon releases, Bush stubbornly refused to act.

Now, with heads of the most powerful nations gathering for the annual Group of Eight summit in Germany, Bush has unveiled his own global warming plan. He wants the 15 largest greenhouse gas emitting countries to meet over the next 18 months to set long-term goals for emissions reductions. There are several good ideas tucked into it, one of them being that developing countries like China help formulate and meet international emissions goals.

But there are also serious flaws, chief among them the president's insistence that emissions reductions be voluntary. That hasn't worked in the United States and there's no reason to believe it will produce the reductions needed internationally. And the plan he has proposed postpones the most difficult short-term task - setting emission reductions - until he's out of office.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, host of this year's summit, has proposed deep mandatory emissions cuts by 2050. Her plan, which Bush quickly rejected, is in line with estimates of top climate scientists. They say greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by up to 80 percent by mid-century to avert the worst consequences of global warming.

Bush not only has failed to lead our own and other nations in developing an effective and scientifically well-grounded global warming strategy, but he also has blocked efforts to continue scientific studies on the subject. Deep budget cuts imposed by the administration will cripple the nation's ability to monitor global warming with satellites, The Associated Press reported this week. Government scientists told the White House in December that the cuts will cause crucial gaps in data about melting glaciers and ice sheets, as well as the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

As the world's richest and most powerful country - not to mention the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases - the United States should be leading international climate change efforts.

While it's gratifying to hear Bush finally speak seriously about global warming, he must be judged by his actions, not his words.

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