Climate of change

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

For too long, global warming has matched Mark Twain's description of the weather: Everybody talked about it, but nobody did anything about it. That may be changing. The question is whether it's changing fast enough to keep up with the changes in climate.

First, the bad news: An Australian researcher reported this week that carbon dioxide emissions have increased much faster than projected. They were 35 percent higher in 2006 than in 1990. Part of the reason may be that warmer oceans have less ability to absorb carbon dioxide from the air than cooler ones.

Now, the encouraging news: The Kansas Department of Health and Environment did something last week that no other government entity in America ever did before: It blocked the expansion of a large coal-fired power plant on the basis of excessive greenhouse gas emissions.

That plant, situated in Holcomb, Kan., would have used the same pulverized-coal technology that Peabody Energy Corp. is building into its Prairie State facility some 50 miles southeast of St. Louis.

Environmentalists have tried unsuccessfully in state and federal court to block construction of the Illinois plant. They've warned that it would degrade air quality in Southwestern Illinois and would be the nation's largest single source of greenhouse gases. The U.S. Court of Appeals denied their case in August.

Like Illinois, Kansas has no law explicitly limiting carbon dioxide emissions. And like their Illinois colleagues, environmental regulators who assessed the Kansas plant did not take greenhouse gas emissions into consideration when they recommended it be approved.

The difference is that Kansas' top environmental official refused to go along with that recommendation. "I believe it would be irresponsible to ignore emerging information about the contribution of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to climate change," said Roderick L. Bremby, who heads the state's environmental agency.

Bremby decided that under Kansas state law, he has the authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions. The U.S. Supreme Court found in June that federal environmental regulators have the same authority, but Bush administration officials have chosen to not exercise it.

On the same day that Bremby denied the coal plant's permit, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate that

would create a "cap-and-trade" system for carbon emissions. That bill, sponsored by Sens. John Warner, R-Va., and Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., would limit carbon dioxide emissions and set up a national system under which companies could buy and sell the right to pollute. A similar system has been in place since 1990 for emissions that cause acid rain.

The best approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions is international, but it also makes sense to have a national standard. The action to stop the plant in Kansas is unprecedented and could well signal an increasing environmental sensitivity at the state level that has been woefully absent at the federal level. But its actual environmental benefits will be slight, so long as other states allow more greenhouse gas sources to come on line. The damage is cumulative, so the response must be collective.

International leaders are meeting in December to establish a new framework for reducing carbon emissions. It's crucial that Congress take action, too. Complaining about emissions no longer cuts it. It's time to act.

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