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A Climate for Change

By Jeffery D. Sachs

When climate-change skeptics mock the fear about a rise of a "few degrees" in temperature, we should remind them of how it feels to have a 103° fever. A few degrees above normal can mean the difference between life and death, species survival and extinction. And a few actions on our part could make the difference between a healthy planet and one that falls into an environmental tailspin. The time has come for action. The earth's future is in our hands.

Many climate shocks have already become more common: powerful hurricanes, droughts, heat waves and blizzards. Much worse will come unless we stabilize the level of carbon dioxide, or CO2, in the atmosphere at safe levels. Before the industrial era, CO2 concentration was 280 parts per million (p.p.m.) in the atmosphere. If current trends continue, that could reach 560 p.p.m. by mid-century. Yet because our energy system is so deeply embedded in the world economy--in vehicles, power plants, factories, residences and office buildings--it will take decades to reamp it. So people who care about the future of the planet will need to push for businesses to produce electricity, concrete, steel and plastics in new ways.

Concerned citizens will also have to think globally. The U.S. is about to be overtaken by China as the world's largest emitter of CO2 from energy use. For years we have brushed off the rest of the world as other countries hav pleaded for the U.S. to get its house in order. Now as China's CO2 output threatens more intense hurricanes and droughts in the U.S., the tables are turned, and we will certainly want China to control emissions. In fact, since CO2 mixes freely in the atmosphere, every country's climate depends on the whole world's actions. The good new is that global action, if timely and strong, could head off a doubling of CO2 at an annual cost of less than 1% of world income.

The timing for a global agreement is right. In December the U.S. and the rest of the world will begin negotiating a set of standards to follow the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. The new rules need to embody certain key realities: all countries must join; the world's power plants, automobile fleets and buildings will have to shift to low-carbon technologies; a world "price" must be charged for emitting carbon into the atmosphere to provide a market incentive for companies and governments to make the changeover. And rich countries must help poor countries get on the low-carbon track by, for example, compensating them for ending the deforestation that leads to carbon emissions as well as a loss of biodiversity.

Earlier this month, the Global Roundtable on Climate Change, which is based at the Earth Institute at Columbia University and includes companies and organizations from all parts of the world, adopted a consensus statement that could serve as a template for an international agreement. Green-technology leaders like General Electric,

insurance leaders like Swiss Re, automobile firms like Volvo and innovative Chinese and Indian firms all endorsed it, as did many of the world's prominent scientists.

Now you can join as well. The roundtable invites you to add your signature to show that the citizens of the world yearn for a serious and global agreement, one based on the best science and the interests of our children. By signing on at www.nextgenerationearth.org you can send a powerful message to politicians and business leaders around the globe that climate change is a battle for our common future.

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