

# The Kyoto Protocol: an overview

## History

In 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was released, establishing an international framework to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases at levels that would prevent dangerous human interference with global climate. This general principle of the Convention, which has not been explicitly defined, implies that actions taken to address climate change will be sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally and economic development to proceed sustainably. This treaty represented an important first step in addressing one of the most important environmental issues in the world today.

Following five years of international negotiations under the Convention, world governments adopted the Kyoto Protocol, which established legally binding greenhouse gas emissions targets. The protocol directs industrial countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2% of 1990 levels in the commitment period 2008 – 2012. Canada's target is to reduce emissions by 6% of 1990 levels.

## Kyoto mechanisms

The Kyoto Protocol includes innovative mechanisms to assist parties with cost-effective ways to meet their emission reduction commitments. These mechanisms—known as the Kyoto Mechanisms—allow countries to meet their Kyoto targets by cooperating internationally in activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The three Kyoto Mechanisms are:

## Participants

Today, over 186 world governments are Parties to the Convention. This agreement has more countries involved than most any other environmental treaty. All Parties to the Convention are committed to respond to climate change.

Annex I Parties to the Convention, of which there are 41 including Canada, are industrialized countries that have historically contributed the most to climate change. The per-capita emissions of Annex I countries are higher than most developing countries, and they tend to have more financial and institutional

capacity to address climate change (Figure 1). Annex I Parties are committed to adopt national policies to reach emission reduction targets as set out in the Kyoto Protocol.

The 24 Annex II Parties are obliged to contribute financial resources and climate-friendly technologies to developing countries to help them respond to climate change. The remaining 145 non-Annex I Parties are responsible for reporting in more general terms the actions they are taking to address climate change.

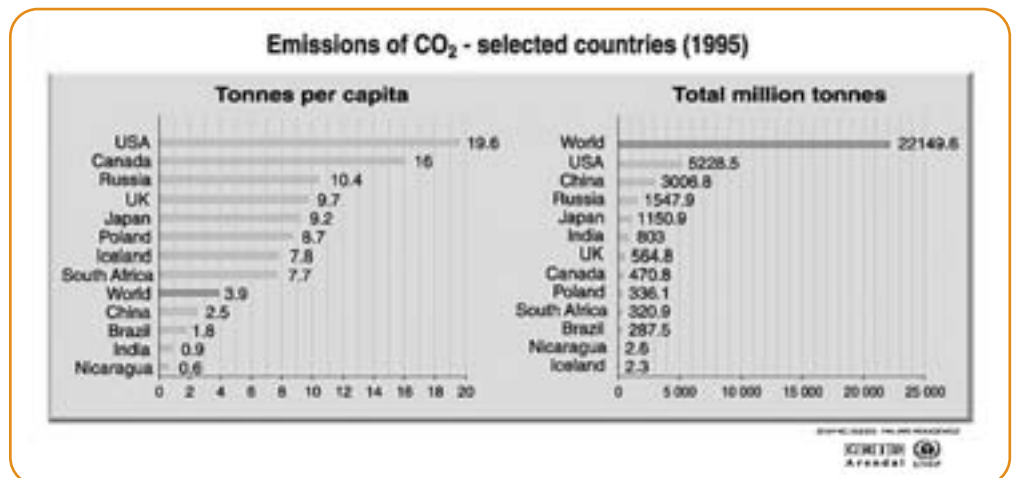


Figure 1

SOURCE: United Nations Environment Programme and GRID-Arendal. Available at Vital Climate Graphics [www.climateark.org](http://www.climateark.org)

- The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), a way to earn credits by investing in emission reduction projects in developing countries.
- Joint Implementation (JI), a way to earn credits by investing in emission reduction projects in developed countries that have taken on a Kyoto target.
- International Emissions Trading (IET), which will permit developed countries that have taken on a Kyoto target to buy and sell emission credits among themselves.



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# Canada and the Kyoto Protocol

Following years of consultation, Canada released an implementation plan that describes how greenhouse gas reductions of 6% below 1990 levels will be achieved by 2008 – 2012. At the rate we are currently emitting, however, we will have instead *increased* our emissions by 27% of our 1990 levels by 2010. This plan has several key principles, including a commitment not to put the Canadian

economy at risk, and to ensure that no region in Canada will bear an unfair burden to meet the emission target.

For Canadians, ratification signifies that the debate over whether or not current climate change is human-induced is over. A new era, which emphasizes finding ways to slow the rate and magnitude of climate change and adapt to the impacts, has begun.

Environment Minister David Anderson said, “Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol is the right thing to do for Canadians, for the global environment and for future generations. The scientific consensus demanded action, and the Government of Canada listened and worked with all sectors and segments of the population to develop a climate change plan for Canada that will get results.”

## Why is the Kyoto Protocol important to northern Canadians?

Northern regions are projected to experience the greatest and the swiftest impacts of climate change. Already, local observations and scientific monitoring in the North show that significant changes are taking place. It could be argued that the Canadian North (characterized by sparse research and monitoring, emerging governments, remote

communities, and a smaller tax base) would experience an unfair burden with respect to coping with the impacts of climate change.

Northern Canada will benefit from the Canadian plan. The plan includes the establishment of a domestic emissions trading system, a partnership fund to cost-share actions to reduce emissions,

strategic infrastructure investments, an innovation strategy, and targeted measures including information, incentives, regulations, and tax measures. There will be new opportunities for projects in the areas of energy efficiency, renewable energies, research and education, and international cooperation.

## The road ahead

Only the Parties to the Convention that have also become Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, through ratification, will be bound to the treaty once it comes into force. To come into force, 55 Parties to the Convention must ratify (accept, approve, or accede) the Protocol, including Annex 1 Parties (industrialized countries) accounting for 55% of that group’s carbon dioxide emissions in 1990. As of March 13, 2003, 31 Annex 1 Parties have ratified, accounting for 43.9% of that group’s emissions.

Of note, the two largest emitters, the United States and the Russian Federation, which account for 36.1% and 17.4% of Annex Party 1 emissions respectively, have not ratified (Table 1). The Canadian government ratified the Kyoto Protocol in December 2002. However, Canada’s ratification is not enough to enter the protocol into force internationally. Unless the United States changes its current policy of non-participation in this international agreement, Russian ratification is required for the convention to come into force.

Once the Protocol enters into force, international attention will shift to implementation of its emissions targets. With implementation, it is hoped that the trend of rising emissions in industrialized countries will be reversed. International negotiations on emission-reduction targets for the second commitment period, starting in 2013, are scheduled to begin in 2005.

## Additional reading

Climate Change Secretariat. 2002. *A Guide to the Climate Change Process*. Bonn, Germany. Available at <http://unfccc.int>

Government of Canada. 2002. *Climate Change Plan for Canada*. Available at [http://www.climatechange.gc.ca/plan\\_for\\_canada/index.html](http://www.climatechange.gc.ca/plan_for_canada/index.html)

Also, keep informed by visiting the NCE’s Kyoto Infocentre for ongoing coverage of issues, events and reports related to the Kyoto Protocol. <http://www.taiga.net/nce/kyoto.html>

Table 1: Top 10 Emitters of Annex 1 Parties to the UNFCCC

Country	% of Total Emissions of Annex 1 Parties	Ratified as of March, 2003
United States	36.1%	No
Russian Federation	17.4%	No
Japan	8.5%	Yes
Germany	7.4%	Yes
United Kingdom	4.3%	Yes
Canada	3.3%	Yes
Italy	3.1%	Yes
France	2.7%	Yes
Australia	2.1%	No
Spain	1.9%	Yes
<b>Total</b>	<b>86.8%</b>	

SOURCE: [http://unfccc.int/resource/kpthermo\\_if.html](http://unfccc.int/resource/kpthermo_if.html)