



Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development

Contact: Candice Wu: +1.202.338.1300, candicewu@igsd.org

EPA approves alternatives for super-greenhouse HFC refrigerants

Washington, D.C., 16 December 2011 – The U.S. EPA took a major step this week towards reducing the fastest growing greenhouse gas in the United States by approving three low global warming potential (GWP) hydrocarbon alternatives to hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) refrigerants. HFCs are known as super-greenhouse gases because many of these man-made refrigerants have a global warming potential hundreds to thousands of times greater than CO₂.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, HFC emissions are growing so fast they threaten to push the climate system past the 2°C outer guardrail for a safe climate in a matter of decades. “The world has an ever narrowing window of time to stay within the 2 degrees scenario,” stated UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. Without fast action to limit the growth of HFCs, HFCs could equal nearly 20% of CO₂ emissions by 2050, or about the same as current annual emissions from transport, and up to 45% of CO₂ emissions if CO₂ emissions are limited to 450 ppm.

The EPA’s decision to list three new alternatives to HFCs in household and small commercial refrigerators and freezers “represents a major step in towards the increased use of climate-friendly refrigerants in the US and will help spur their application globally,” said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development.

The decision was made under the EPA’s Significant New Alternatives Policy (SNAP) program and estimates that replacing older refrigerants will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 600,000 tons by 2020.

A proposal to phase down all HFC uses under the Montreal Protocol was put forward by small island nations and separately by the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and could provide the equivalent of 100 billion tones of CO₂ by 2050.

While supported by a vocal majority of 108 Parties, India and China delayed action to await the outcome of the Durban climate negotiations that concluded last Sunday, arguing that HFCs can only be addressed under the climate treaty, known as the Kyoto Protocol.

“With the Durban outcome delaying a global treaty until 2015 to go into effect in 2020, it is clear that that other venues must be used when they can do part of the job,” argues Zaelke. “That’s the beauty of the Montreal Protocol. Very few opportunities exist to target such significant mitigation, so cheaply, and with 100 percent assurance it will get done. We know it will work to reduce HFCs because it’s already worked to phase out nearly 100 similar chemicals.”

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