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Contact: Alex Viets, IGSD: +1.213.321.0911, aviets@igsd.org

Montreal Protocol Celebrated for Ozone Success – Can Do Same For Climate

Washington, DC, September 16, 2010 – Today marks the 23rd anniversary of the Montreal Protocol, the international treaty that was created in 1987 to protect and restore the ozone layer. The treaty has not only achieved each of its goals over the last several decades, including this year’s major milestone which marks the complete phase-out of CFCs, it has also become the world’s best climate treaty, to date.

Aggressively phasing out CFCs translated not only to major ozone protection, but also to significant climate protection: 222 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent (CO₂-eq.) in mitigation which has delayed climate change by 7 to 12 years.

The Montreal Protocol Parties began actively protecting the climate system in 2007 with an agreement to accelerate HCFCs, the chemicals that replaced CFCs. This agreement will avoid up to 15 billion tonnes of CO₂-eq. by 2040, another potential big win for climate, albeit with a caveat:

“The Montreal Protocol Parties took unprecedented action in 2007 to protect the climate system, in addition to the ozone layer, but their well-meaning actions will be quickly undone if we don’t pay attention to the alternatives that will replace HCFCs,” warned Durwood Zaelke. “The HFC substitutes for HCFCs are big, bad greenhouse gases that need to be taken out of circulation now.”

HFCs – many with hundreds to thousands the global warming potential of CO₂ – are currently the main coolants used in refrigeration and air conditioning systems, as well as blowing agents for insulating foams. However, now that new ozone- and climate-friendly alternatives are available and more are emerging, HFCs are an unnecessary climate burden. Should the HFC problem go ignored, there is a price. The growth of HFCs is skyrocketing and if they are not controlled, their climate impact could equal that of CFCs at their peak, according to the new Executive Summary of the 2010 Ozone Assessment by the Montreal Protocol’s Scientific Assessment Panel, which was released today. Over 300 scientists were involved in the preparation of the assessment.

“Air conditioning and refrigeration are huge industries, and HFC emissions are expected to grow dramatically over the next few decades without serious regulation – this would essentially wipe

out progress achieved so far under the Kyoto Protocol,” added Zaelke.

The solution? Getting rid of HFCs – gases that are very similar to CFCs and other ozone-depleting substances – by phasing them down under the Montreal Protocol. Taking this action has a big reward: up to 100 billion tonnes of CO₂-eq. in climate mitigation by 2050.

The Federated States of Micronesia, with backing from other island Parties, is determined to make this happen at this November’s Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol in Kampala, Uganda. The small island nation, increasingly vulnerable to sea level rise and other climate impacts, submitted a proposal on HFCs in April, for the second year in a row, in the hopes of making a major dent in greenhouse gas emission that will help delay near-term consequences from climate change. Mexico, the US, and Canada, followed suit, with their own joint proposal, but more leadership is needed.

“There’s a general feeling of ‘yes, this is a good idea’, but it’s not being backed up with the kind of high-level political support that we need,” said Zaelke. “The Montreal Protocol strategy is fast, cost-effective, can achieve major mitigation, and has the backing of 196 Parties, a strong financial mechanism and 23 years of experience and expertise. In comparison with other available options right now, this is a damn good deal.”

In his remarks for International Ozone Day, United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon recognized the Montreal Protocol’s key role to play in achieving climate success, encouraging the treaty to continue its important efforts:

. . . Because ozone-depleting chemicals are also greenhouse gases, the Protocol is instrumental in the fight against climate change. . . and will continue to play an important role. . . I encourage Parties to the Montreal Protocol to continue to build on this model and to explore synergies that could help address other environmental challenges, especially climate change.

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