Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development

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Scientists to U.S. Congressional Committee: Time for Serious Action on Black Carbon

Aggressive mitigation of second largest contributor to climate change can provide significant environmental and health benefits

Washington, D.C., March 16, 2010 – Black carbon soot, produced from incomplete combustion of diesel fuel and biomass, is one of the largest contributors to climate change apart from CO_2, as well as a danger to public health, and should be a prime target of policymakers according to scientists and experts testifying at today's hearing of the U.S. House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming chaired by Congressman Edward Markey.

"Black carbon packs a powerful punch when it comes to climate change, absorbing solar radiation while in the atmosphere and also darkening the surfaces of snow and ice, contributing to increased melting in vulnerable regions such as the Arctic and Himalayas," said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development (IGSD). "The good news is that it only stays in the atmosphere for up to a few weeks, making it an ideal target for achieving fast cooling through aggressive mitigation measures."

Reducing black carbon emissions and other short-term climate forcers such as HFCs, methane, and tropospheric ozone can serve as a complement to CO_2 reduction measures, which can take up to 1,000 years to produce significant cooling because of CO_2's long atmospheric lifetime.

"A drastic reduction in BC has the potential of offsetting CO_2-induced warming for a decade or two. Effectively, BC reduction may provide a possible mechanism for buying time to develop and implement effective steps for reducing CO_2 emissions," said Dr. V. Ramanathan from Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego, in his written testimony.

Because developed countries have been successful in reducing black carbon emissions in recent years, the technology exists to help developing countries, such as China and India, significantly cut their soot emissions, through diesel-particulate filters for vehicles and cleaner-burning cookstoves. Dr. Ramanathan has spear-headed a program called Project Surya to bring solar cookstoves to India to assist in gathering additional data on the climate forcing potential of black carbon and its impact on local health – emissions of black carbon contribute to respiratory illness, the fourth leading cause of excess mortality in developing countries.

Installing particulate filters in current and new fleets of diesel vehicles in the U.S. is also an

important strategy; filters can cut particulate emissions by up to 90 percent. “We already have the technologies needed to achieve deep reductions,” said Chairman Markey in his opening statement. “Developing and installing technologies would create jobs and move us forward in the clean energy economy.”

Black carbon will also be the topic of discussion at an event hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s China Environment Forum in D.C. tomorrow, March 17. IGSD’s black carbon expert, Dennis Clare, will participate in “U.S.-China Cooperation: The Co-Benefits of Reducing Black Carbon” along with Dr. Ramanathan and John Guy from the U.S. EPA, to discuss possible ways for the U.S. and China to collaborate on mitigation of black carbon and the major benefits that could be obtained from such collaboration.

“Policymakers are beginning to take note of black carbon and other short-term climate forcers like HFCs, methane, and tropospheric ozone, where emissions reductions are cost-effective and can yield major climate and health benefits,” added Zaelke. “These “fast-action” strategies are low-hanging fruits that need to be picked now to avoid the dangerous near-term consequences of abrupt climate change.”

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For more information on the Woodrow Wilson Center event, please see:
http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=events.event_summary&event_id=602636

For more information on black carbon and the importance of tackling non-CO_2 climate forcers, please see:

Turning Down the Heat: The Forgotten 50%: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT6Kjf7q6lU

Turning Down the Heat: The Montreal Protocol & HFCs:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ozR-iP9yQA

Reducing abrupt climate change risk using the Montreal Protocol and other regulatory actions to complement cuts in CO_2 emissions (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 2009):
http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/10/09/0902568106.full.pdf+html

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