

Will the new EPA rules for coal plants inspire other countries?

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The coal-fired Plant Scherer is shown in operation early Sunday, June 1, 2014, in Juliette, Ga. (AP Photo/John Amis)

The Environmental Protection Agency's new proposal to limit carbon dioxide emissions from existing coal plants is getting mixed reviews in the coal-intensive Midwest, but it is playing well in the international community.

Experts on climate negotiations said that the EPA's proposed carbon dioxide regulations would help ensure that the U.S. meets its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent by 2020, part of an international agreement [forged in talks in Copenhagen](#) in January 2010. And with preparations underway for reaching a pact on post-2020 emissions at a summit scheduled for Paris in December 2015, international negotiators said the EPA measure would encourage other nations to step up efforts to curb greenhouse gases by greater amounts.

"This is important domestically but also internationally," Kevin Kennedy, director of the World Resources Institute's climate initiative, said in an interview. "It is a demonstration that the Obama administration is ready to follow through and implement the president's climate action plan. It's important for the world to see as well as domestic getting reductions in the United States."

Nicholas Stern, chairman of an institute for climate change and environment at the London School of Economics, said in a statement Monday that the administration's support for the EPA proposal "represents real leadership." Connie Hedegaard, the European Union's commissioner for climate action, issued [a statement Monday](#) saying, "This proposed rule is the strongest action ever taken by the U.S. government to fight climate change, which is good news and also shows that the United States is taking climate change seriously." She added that the EPA plan "sends a positive signal ahead of the Paris conference."

The main question for the Paris round is whether the world's other biggest and faster-growing greenhouse gas emitters — China and India — will take action to rein in their carbon dioxide output. China's emissions have grown 50 percent since 2005. Indications of international commitments could come as early as March 2015, when countries are supposed to spell out their intentions.

On Tuesday, Reuters reported, He Jiankun, chairman of China's Advisory Committee on Climate Change, [said at a conference in Beijing](#) that a carbon cap or ceiling will be written into China's next five-year plan, which begins in 2016. Support in China for a carbon cap had been growing already. Yang Ailun, a senior associate at WRI dealing with emerging countries, said last month that a dozen Chinese provinces representing 34 percent of China's coal consumption had endorsed zero growth in coal use or even cuts from 2013 levels. She said that the central government could follow suit, driven by acute attacks of urban pollution and a desire to rebalance the economy away from heavy industry.

Since the talks in Copenhagen, international climate negotiators have focused on getting countries to draw up their own climate commitments and let them figure out how to achieve those targets. Meetings have been held in Doha and Warsaw, and there will be a mid-year session in Bonn on Wednesday.

Secretary of State John Kerry said in a Financial Times op-ed Tuesday that the administration's commitment to the EPA proposal should demonstrate U.S. commitment and spur moves toward a global agreement. "Even as we strive to do better, we recognize that no country can solve this problem alone. Global cooperation is required," he wrote. "The U.S. is prepared to play a leading role, both in getting our own house in order and in bringing other nations to the table." He added, "Today, we understand that emissions coming from anywhere threaten the future for people everywhere."

"This is really powerful. It's a game-changer for the international process," said Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy. "This makes clear we're really serious about climate."

Many U.S. executives doubt, however, that either China or India, where a new government is just settling in, will follow the U.S. lead, or that Japan, which has closed its nuclear power plants and revved up consumption of coal and natural gas, can stick to its earlier commitments.

Such business executives, the Chamber of Commerce, and an association of steel companies argue that the United States is simply sacrificing its competitive advantage by adding to its electricity costs. Jay Timmons, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, said in a conference call Monday that "the

administration's unilateral action could shift jobs to China and India." EPA says, however, that its regulations would not add much or anything to electricity rates and that the regulations would boost the U.S. economy.

Jeffrey Holmstead, a lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani and the former top EPA official for clean air in the Bush administration, said, "I think the question is, now that the administration has said, 'Here's what we've done on cars, what we're willing to do on power plants,' China, India, what are you willing to do? The assertion by the administration is that by showing leadership, we will persuade other countries to come to the table and do aggressive things of their own. I think that remains to be seen."

But while many Republicans and coal state Democrats have complained, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell put it, that the EPA proposal would be "a dagger in the heart of the American middle class," many international negotiators worry that the EPA goals are not aggressive enough to hew to the goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees centigrade by the middle of the century.

Most climatologists believe that sticking to the two degree number is important for avoiding widespread, and economically costly, extreme weather events. The EPA proposal cutting coal plant emissions to 30 percent below the 2005 level by 2030 is seen as a major step forward, but falls short of the 42 percent level many negotiators believe is needed for the United States to stick to the 2-degree target. The United States has not made any commitments regarding targets beyond 2020.

"For Paris to deliver what is needed to stay below a 2°C increase in global temperature, all countries, including the United States, must do even more than what this reduction trajectory indicates," Hedegaard said.

"Nevertheless, this is an important step for an administration and a president really investing politically in fighting climate change."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/06/04/will-the-new-epa-rules-for-coal-plants-inspire-other-countries/>