

Slow progress in Geneva on warming treaty

- US still resists emissions targets
- 'Pledge and review' could break impasse

Washington

THE international negotiating team drafting a treaty to limit global warming is trying desperately to find language that the United States — alone among the developed nations in refusing to declare a target date by which its emissions of carbon dioxide will be stabilized — can support. But progress is slow, and the second two-week meeting of the United Nations climate convention negotiating committee ended in Geneva last week without agreement on how to limit the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

The aim of the negotiations, which continue in Nairobi in September, is to produce a climate convention for signature at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, scheduled for June 1992 in Brazil.

Most observers agree that an international agreement to reduce world greenhouse gas emissions below their present level (said by last year's Intergovernmental Panel on Cli-

mate Change to be necessary if the global mean temperature is to be stabilized) is impossible before 1992. But many countries would like to see the initial convention include an intermediate commitment to limit greenhouse gas emissions, rather than being a simple expression of concern about global warming. Many European Communities governments believe a feasible target would be for the industrialized countries to agree to stabilize their carbon dioxide emissions at present levels by 2000.

This is where the United States' position is a stumbling block, and an important one because the United States emits a greater volume of greenhouse gases than any other country. The US administration will not countenance a carbon dioxide emissions target, stating that total US emissions of greenhouse gases in 2000 will be no greater than in 1987 (see *Nature* 348, 4, 1990). But this includes controls on the use of chlorofluorocarbons made under the Montreal Protocol — cuts most nations say cannot be 'double counted' under a new climate agreement.

To break the impasse, Japanese, British and French negotiators in Geneva proposed a system of 'pledge and review' of greenhouse gas emissions. Under this proposal, countries signing the convention would produce a statement detailing a strategy to control emissions. Progress in each country will be reviewed periodically by a team of international experts.

The wording was sufficiently vague to avoid alienating the United States at this stage, allowing countries to produce their own plans to control emissions, which need not include specific commitments on carbon dioxide. Environmentalist groups in Geneva were quick to attack the pledge-and-review proposal, labelling it "hedge and retreat". And on the last day of the meeting, the Dutch delegation, speaking for the European Communities, said that pledge-and-review is only acceptable if the pledges take the form of binding commitments — something unlikely to win US support.

With no other firm proposals on the table, pledge and review is not yet dead in the water. But if the climate convention is to have any real teeth, it may be necessary to set an overall emissions target for the pledge and review process to meet, and for pressure to be put on those countries that fail to pull their weight. How far this pressure could be applied without the United States (and probably a number of developing countries) rejecting the convention on grounds of an infringement of national sovereignty remains to be seen.

Peter Aldhous

HUMAN GENOME PROJECT

HUGO flirting with Johns Hopkins

Washington

THE Human Genome Organization (HUGO) is negotiating to affiliate its American office in Bethesda, Maryland with Johns Hopkins University, less than one hour away in Baltimore. Such a move would allow the office to receive grants from federal agencies, ending its reliance on charitable funding.

HUGO's Bethesda office is now funded through a four-year, \$1-million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. But if HUGO is to fulfil its intended role of coordinating the international effort to map and sequence the human genome, some support from governments is essential. The problem in the United States is that institutions applying for federal grants must conform to set standards for accounting, social security arrangements for their staff and the like. HUGO, with limited funding, has been unable to do this. "We're in a catch-22 situation," says Diane Hinton, who runs the Bethesda office single-handedly.

Affiliation to Johns Hopkins may be the answer. HUGO could then apply through the university for federal grants to support its Bethesda office. Hopkins officials have said they can see no legal obstacles to the affiliation, and Hinton and HUGO director James Wyngaarden visited Baltimore last week to begin the negotiations proper.

Any large university could serve as an umbrella organization for the HUGO office, but Johns Hopkins is particularly appropriate. Apart from its proximity to Bethesda, Hopkins also houses the Genome Database, the main repository for human gene mapping data.

Since HUGO was conceived in 1988 as an organization of genome researchers to provide 'bottom-up' coordination between the various national genome initiatives, one goal has been to win government funding. But HUGO's regional offices have so far had to depend on charitable support.

The European office in London has got off the ground with help from the Wellcome Trust and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, and there are hopes that European governments will also provide money. But the Pacific office in Osaka has been paralysed by a lack of funds. No government agency has shown any interest in providing money for HUGO and the Japanese office is finding it difficult to raise money from private sources because of government red tape that inhibits the establishment of tax-free foundations.

Ironically, HUGO's newest venture — a local office in Moscow that opened this week — is the first to get official government backing, with the Soviet authorities pledging financial support.

Peter Aldhous

Power lobby pressure

A COALITION of US coal companies and electricity utilities is considering a national advertising campaign later this year to reduce public support for energy policies designed to slow global warming. The campaign, organized by a new organization called the Information Council for the Environment (ICE), has already been tested in a number of small US cities. "How much are you willing to pay to solve a problem that may not exist?" asks the headline on a sample full-page newspaper advertisement.

ICE is advised by a number of the noted greenhouse sceptics among the scientific community, including Patrick Michaels, from the University of Virginia, and Robert Balling, from Arizona State University. Its board is now mulling over the response to the trial campaign before deciding whether to go national.

The campaign has angered environmentalists, who accuse the power lobby of disinformation, ignoring the scientific consensus summarized in last year's report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In particular, green activists dispute one advertisement that claims Minneapolis is getting colder, pointing to a 1989 University of Minnesota study showing a significant rise in mean temperature in Eastern Minnesota since the 1850's.

If the campaign had run as originally suggested by ICE's advertising agents, the environmentalists' ire may have been even greater. One suggested headline, thrown out by ICE's board stated: "Some say the Earth is getting warmer...some also said the Earth was flat." P.A.