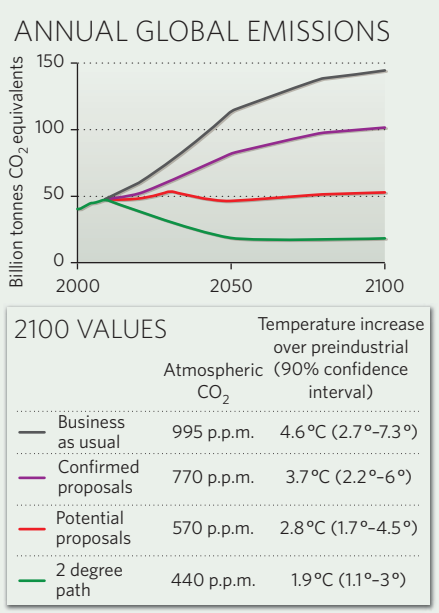
change over the coming month. He went on to criticize many developing countries for trying to avoid commitments to reduce their own potential growth in emissions.

Pershing also sought to head off rampant speculation that the United States would not be ready to sign a treaty in Copenhagen, given that several alternative climate bills are still pending in Congress. Those bills offer 17–20% emissions reduction below 2005 levels by 2020, he said, enough for the world to be able to judge the US position.

However, the economic growth of the 1990s means that such cuts would equate to a reduction of just a few per cent below 1990 levels. That's not enough, says the Alliance of Small Island States, which is calling for industrialized nations to promise a 45% emissions reduction by 2020 compared with 1990 levels. The alliance points out that since the last IPCC report in 2007, new research has suggested that there will be even greater impacts on their nations than previously estimated, including flooding, erosion and an upsurge in extreme weather.

CLIMATE INTERACTIVE



Alden Meyer, director of strategy and policy for the Union of Concerned Scientists, in Washington DC, says developed-country commitments are indeed less ambitious than they should be, but nonetheless represent a solid base that can be built on in the future. Like many others, he thinks that countries are likely to converge on some kind of agreement in Copenhagen, even if negotiators need to continue working out the details next year. "We probably aren't going to get what we want in Copenhagen," he says. "But can we get what we need? I think we can." ■

Jeff Tollefson

See also www.nature.com/roadtocopenhagen

SCIENCE AND THE LISBON TREATY
Europe's changing role in climate and space policy.
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Wellcome Trust makes it personal in funding revamp

The Wellcome Trust, the UK's largest non-governmental funder of biomedical research, is giving its grant scheme a major overhaul.

The trust plans to stop asking researchers to submit extensive applications detailing their proposed work over the three- or five-year period of a grant. Instead, it will award longer-term funding focused on individual researchers rather than on specific research projects. "The best way to fund science is to fund people," says Mark Walport, director of the Wellcome Trust.

The new Wellcome Trust Investigator Awards for junior faculty members, and the Senior Investigator Awards for more experienced scientists, will assess researchers and their ideas primarily through an interview process, with funding awarded for five to seven years. Researchers will still have to submit written applications, but "we don't want people to focus on the precise details of how the particular experiment will be done", says Walport.

Walport hopes that the shift in emphasis will allow researchers to focus on presenting a big scientific question and why it is important, with applicants grilled on the details of how they plan to tackle the problem during interview.

"The best way to fund science is to fund people."

The investigator awards build on the trust's existing fellowships, which, like most funders' fellowships, are not given to researchers as a supplement to existing salaried academic positions. "When we interview people for fellowships, they have an opportunity to present their case, and one can have a good exploration as to whether they have a spark and original ideas. We want to extend that idea to people with salaried positions to give people a decent quantum of funding," says Walport. Winners will have the freedom to spend their funding on any research question they want, and will not be limited to the ideas they proposed in their application, he says.

The trust has yet to agree the exact amount of money it will commit to the investigator awards but expects it to be about the same amount that it currently awards to project and programme grants, which totalled around £110 million (US$180 million) in 2008. The first round of applications for the investigator awards is expected in autumn 2010, with funding to commence at the beginning of 2011. The move is in part a response to complaints from scientists about the size of grants and the short funding periods generally set by funding bodies in the United Kingdom, says Walport.

Given the more extensive nature of the investigator awards, fewer scientists will be supported than under the current scheme. But Jim Smith, director of the National Institute for Medical Research in Mill Hill, UK, and a previous winner of several Wellcome Trust grants, says that "it is better to fund one person properly than two or three people inadequately". He adds that if the trust's scheme proves to be successful, other funders should consider similar approaches.

The trust says that it is not aware of any other funding body in the United Kingdom that offers the same style of funding. But in the United States, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), in Chevy Chase, Maryland, has operated a similar scheme since the late 1980s. It now runs funding rounds roughly every three years, awarding about $60 million in total based on short written applications outlining a broad scientific question, and then on a more detailed interview. Winners receive awards lasting five years, and are given total freedom to spend the money on any medical research question they wish to pursue. "Traditional grants don't look so favourably on researchers if they venture outside the area they said they were going to tackle," says Jack Dixon, HHMI vice-president and chief scientific officer, adding that giving researchers the freedom to pursue discoveries made along the way produces "better science". The approach is more honest, agrees Smith, because it acknowledges that science has often moved on between the grant application being made and work actually beginning. ■

Natasha Gilbert