

Climate forecasters look back

September's meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has a weighty agenda, but the first order of business is a birthday party. **Anna Barnett** reports.

On August 31 — before holding elections for its chairman and governing bureau, deciding what to do with the money from its 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, and fleshing out plans for its next assessment report — the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) celebrated 20 years as the world's premier climate change oracle. Marking the anniversary is a climate policy timeline that goes online today at *Nature Reports Climate Change* (<http://www.nature.com/climate/timeline/icp/index.html>). The timeline looks back at the international policy debates that first gave birth to the IPCC, and then were shaped by its findings.

Since the United Nations set up the panel in 1988, most climate experts on the globe have contributed to its twice-a-decade reports on the scientific understanding of climate change and its implications. 'Intergovernmental' has been an organizing keyword: officials and experts drawn from government institutions worldwide oversee the IPCC's activities, and all participating governments vet its assessment reports line by line before publication. The cautious conclusions that result have long been seen as authoritative, and the periodic reports funnel scientific information into succeeding rounds of UN climate talks.

The IPCC of 2008 shows little inclination to mess with success. The elections at the meeting September 1–4 kick off work on a



IPCC delegates at the 2007 Nobel ceremonies.

fifth assessment report with a similar scope, structure and schedule to its Nobel-winning predecessor. That six-year timetable won't see the report released until 2013–2014, long after the December 2009 deadline for a UN climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol. But still up for discussion — if not at this IPCC meeting, then soon — is whether the panel can provide more specific and short-term input that post-Kyoto negotiators have anxiously requested.

Though the expert panel has now resolved the question of whether human

activity is responsible for climate change, it will have its work cut out in addressing the many unresolved issues in climate science and in refining its predictions of future warming. That, no doubt, will keep the IPCC going through the next several years, and perhaps decades more.

Published online: 02 September 2008

doi:10.1038/climate.2008.89

Anna Barnett is assistant editor and copy editor of Nature Reports Climate Change.