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Is the Climate Right for Standards?

ISO Ad Hoc Group on Climate Change Submits Report to TMB

WASHINGTON—The Ad Hoc Group (AHG) on Climate Change successfully fulfilled one of its original mandates after two days of meetings here April 9-10, creating a five-page report on global climate change initiatives and how ISO standards might align with those efforts. And while some issues continue to generate disagreement among the various international representatives, there was an overall sense of consensus at the meeting's conclusion on a range of important issues.

“We came out of this meeting with a consensus agreement from the group on the summary and strategic advice document, and a reasonable consensus on the background report,” said Mark Barthel, the AHG chairman from the United Kingdom. “Along with that, we have three annexes that provide a slightly more comprehensive contextual background to our recommendations as well.”

Indeed, the AHG's recommendations on climate change come at a precarious time, as world leaders brace for the Bush administration's policies on a number of environment-related issues. Bush already has alarmed some environmental groups after he abandoned his campaign promise in March to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants and virtually snuffed all possibilities of the United States implementing the requirements of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in its current form. (See *IESU*, April 2001.)

But the AHG was created by the TMB in 2000 to consider such issues and more, acting as a focal point for ISO interactions with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—the group that administers Kyoto Protocol activities. The AHG was given three main activities around which to focus its work:

1. Developing an inventory of existing ISO standards that might be relevant to climate change;
2. Identifying which, if any, of those ISO standards might have use or adaptability to existing initiatives for combating climate change; and
3. Considering the need for any new ISO standards that could contribute to the objectives of the UNFCCC and other related projects.

The group, administered by the Standards Council of Canada, is composed of one representative chosen from each of the 12 countries that make up ISO's Technical Management Board (TMB). Delegates from the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States, Japan, Australia, Germany, and Canada were present at this meeting, with the hopes of creating a consensus report detailing AHG activities and recommendations.

AHG members were generally pleased with the meeting's accomplishments, which included five-page report that will be delivered to the TMB for consideration and possible action during their June 4-6 meeting in Geneva, Switzerland.

James Connaughton, the U.S. representative on the AHG, told *IESU* that he was satisfied with the work done at the meeting as well as the productive nature of the group's work since its creation.

"The group has done good work, and it has succeeded in its mandate," Connaughton said. "[The U.S.] is very pleased with the outreach that has gone on to date, and we are comfortable with the group's report as a good reflection of the discussions that the AHG has had."

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But one area that may need additional AHG guidance concerns one of the recommendations that states the TMB should convey a potential market need for a document that pulls together all the existing ISO 14000 standards on environmental management systems and sets them in the context of climate change. However, the question of whether there is a global market need for such a document has not been unanimously agreed upon so far.

"It would be fair to say that there was a definite variance of opinion within the group [on that issue]," Barthel said. "There were some members of the group that felt that their national constituencies believed [that] would be extremely useful. There were others who ... felt there was 'market opposition' in their countries."

The Recommendations and Their Meanings

The recommendations in the report correspond to the three areas originally designated by the TMB as defining the scope of the AHG's activity:

Inventory—From secondary references, the group pulled together all of the potential standards in the ISO work program that might have relevance to climate change. The report suggests to the TMB that while this is a very good start and provides an overview of what is going on, there needs to be greater clarity regarding those standards’ specific relevance to climate change initiatives. One way that the report recommends achieving this clarity is by what Barthel called “drilling down” and opening up dialogues with those committees and work groups to see just how realistic their theories are.

“Part of that is going to be two-way communication where we communicate our thoughts in terms of the work that the AHG has done on the market need, market relevance and the need to promote existing standards,” Barthel explained. “They in turn would act as a reality check, telling us if we are right or wrong, if we have missed anything or if other TCs should be on that list.

“We need to add a level to it that will give the TMB and other stakeholders an opportunity to really look at what ISO is doing already,” he said.

Applicability of Existing Standards to Climate Change Initiatives—While the AHG members have experience in numerous standards activities, there is little doubt that the ISO 14000 series on environmental management systems has received the most attention in relation to climate change activities.

Barthel noted that some delegates in the group felt that it would be extremely useful to have something like a technical report that builds on the interim reports from the Climate Change Task Force (CCTF). The CCTF’s specific mandate is to evaluate the applicability of the ISO 14000 series to the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol. He said that some members expressed an interest in a good “toolkit approach” that would include practical examples, like those found in the ISO 14032 Environmental Performance Evaluation Technical Report.

While that kind of guidance was viewed by some as having the potential to be extremely helpful for those who can afford expensive consultants, others raised concerns over a technical report of that kind.

“There are so many ways of dealing with carbon management that you’ve got to be very careful in a technical report not to look like you are presenting an exhaustive list,” Barthel explained.

New Areas for Standards Development—As far as new work items were concerned, the group began with a long list of ideas that was whittled down over the course of the meeting. The most significant area that remained on

the list was greenhouse gas (GHG) protocols. The report recommended the AHG spend additional time evaluating and monitoring the U.N. process, particularly the continuation of the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP-6 Part Two) July 16-27 and COP-7 (slated for late October/early November). By observing developments in the U.N. arena, the AHG believes that it could see how ISO could get involved in the GHG protocol realm.

“Part of the work of the AHG has been to do some serious networking with most of the major players in the International Emissions Trading Association, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development and the World Resources Institute,” Barthel said. “Based on that, we could then look at what ISO could do in terms of standards, specifically to support project-based mechanisms like domestic emissions trading.”

And what about a new standard for climate change? Connaughton was quick to note that just because any one area was identified in the report as having a potential need for standardized approaches does not mean that the AHG was recommending to the TMB that ISO create a technical committee to begin writing standards for that area.

“There is a distinction between identifying what will likely require standardization and whether there is a role for ISO in that activity,” Connaughton said. “Some of this activity may be politically decided, some of it may be decided by other groups and some of it may be appropriate for ISO.

“There still are differences of opinion among members of the AHG as to the nature and extent of any future role for ISO,” he added.

While it was not clear if a new standard was recommended to the TMB in the AHG report, Barthel admitted that it may not be out of the realm of possibility sometime down the road.

“All of the members felt that something that could bring all of those things together and harmonize the best practices, the different approaches and projects at the moment would be useful,” he said. “At the moment, it may be premature; but in maybe a year’s time, who knows? That’s what ISO is there for: to harmonize best practice and then standardize it.”

All Good Things...

One of the final recommendations of the report explained what tasks are left for the AHG to perform. While the very nature of any ad hoc group is transitory, the delegates felt that this report should not signal their demise. They agreed that the AHG will be maintained until after the COP-7 sessions,

and at that point, it will update the report that it produced here., The AHG will then let the TMB decide what happens next.

“There are a lot of people around the table who feel quite strongly that, given all of the uncertainty in the political process, the group has got to continue its work until post COP- 7 and until we’ve got some clarity on what’s going on here and how ISO might be of use,” Barthel said. “But the AHG does not have an infinite life.”

Mitsutsune Yamaguchi, Japanese representative to the AHG and professor of economics at Keio University, said that the meetings did not affect his country’s position and that he felt the AHG’s work was done.

“We believe that the role of the AHG has come to the [sic] end until when we will be asked formally by the UNFCCC to restart,” he told *IESU*.

And while both Barthel and Connaughton remarked that President George W. Bush’s reversal of the U.S. commitment to the Kyoto Protocol had no affect on the meeting, Yamaguchi expressed that the U.S. president’s policy change had an entirely different impact upon his evaluation of the meeting’s achievements.

“President Bush’s announcement of [the U.S.] withdrawal from [the] Kyoto Protocol helped the meetings [become] fruitless,” he said.

The AHG’s recommendations will be considered by ISO’s TMB June 4-6 in Geneva. For more information, contact Barthel by e-mail: mark.barthel@bsi.org.uk; or Connaughton by e-mail: jconnaug@sidley.com.