

What is the Kyoto Protocol and why is it important?

The Kyoto Protocol is an agreement made under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Its aim is to reduce (5,2% by 2012) the emission of the greenhouse gases that harm the atmosphere and lead to global warming and climate change. These gases are created by, amongst other things, the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil.

The protocol was negotiated in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997 and actually came into force in 2005 when enough countries to account for 55% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions had agreed to it. Any country that ratifies the protocol (as of June 2007, 172 had done so) agrees to keep strict limitations on the amount of carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases they produce.

Most of the developed world supports the protocol. The big exception is the United States – which produces about 25% of all greenhouse gases. They believe that it's not the most effective way of reducing emissions and, in its present form, would be damaging to the US economy.

South Africa ratified the protocol in 2002. We are classified as a developing country - one of a group of five (the others are China, Brazil, India and Mexico) who actively support it. The Clean Development Mechanism (part of the protocol) allows industrialised countries to invest in projects in the developing world that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They can then offset some of the credit for those reductions against their emission targets. There are a number of such projects in South Africa which are administered by the Department of Minerals and Energy. Talks about a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol in 2012 are already under way.