

Van Schalkwyk hails G8 climate change deal

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An agreement brokered at this week's G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, has forever changed the international political landscape around the highly contested issue of climate change, says Environment Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk. The agreement also provided the working basis for a compromise to be hammered out between the developed world and the developing nations such as South Africa, China, India and Brazil for a new Kyoto Protocol post-2012, when the current agreement on greenhouse gas emissions expires, he said. Van Schalkwyk was one of the keynote speakers on Friday on the final day of the two-day Renewable Energy & Climate Change summit hosted by the provincial environment and planning department at the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

At the G8 meeting, world leaders agreed to tackle global climate change by making "substantial cuts" in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. It was the first time that US president George Bush has accepted the principle of reducing emissions. The US is still by far the biggest polluter in terms of greenhouse gases, but Bush reneged on a pre-election promise and refused to sign the original Kyoto Protocol. Van Schalkwyk said the G8 decision had settled the scientific debate about climate change once and for all. "There is no way the US can ever go back on the scientific debate, and it is clear that the US's own momentum has now created a situation where they can no longer withdraw from a multilateral forum (Kyoto).

"After yesterday they have committed to a multilateral process." Although the G8 had not decided on emission reduction targets, this was being translated as a 50 percent reduction by 2050, Van Schalkwyk said. "We think compromise is possible." The G8 and, "hopefully", the G5 (South Africa, China, Brazil, India and Mexico) would now provide a "strong message" to the world's environment ministers when they attended climate change talks in Bali at the end of the year. Speaking after one of Koeberg nuclear power station's two generators had come back on line after a technical fault, the environment minister conceded that SA faced "a huge challenge" because 92 percent of its electricity came from coal.

This produced huge quantities of greenhouse gases - particularly because SA coal is relatively "dirty". Van Schalkwyk said even though the current cost of SA electricity - "probably the cheapest in the world" - was likely to increase from 12c per gigawatt (GW) hour to around 18c, this was still way below the current cost of renewable energy from wind (48c or 49c per GW hour) or solar (57c).

This posed a particular challenge in trying to generate more renewable energy. Opening Friday's session, Environmental Affairs MEC Tasneem Essop described the event as "a summit for action" and said it was the final public event of a two-year planning process aimed at delivering a provincial Renewable Energy and Climate Change Strategy for approval by the end of August. She noted predictions that the Western Cape would be among the regions of the world experiencing the greatest effect of climate change - including on agriculture and rural livelihoods, tourism, fishing, water supplies and disaster management. Pointing out that most energy was consumed by people in the middle and upper income brackets, Essop said climate change had to be seen as a "poverty issue".

"If those in our society who consume the most do not change their unsustainable consumption patterns, then the impact of this will be felt by the most vulnerable in our society - the poor. "If we do not act now then the financial, social and environmental costs of dealing with the effects of climate change will be much higher and again the poor will become the victims of our inaction.

"The provincial government was hoping to attract new investment of R8-billion into the renewable energy sector by 2014, and this could result in about 15 000 new jobs, she said. In his address, premier Ebrahim Rasool said the province could warm twice as fast as other areas, but yet it was not a major polluter.

"We are paying for the sins of others." "We need to give leadership, and it's about constructing a programme of action that is at once global and local, and not disempowering the individual. We need a far more compassionate discourse (on climate change) that also offers opportunities."