

World Bank Chief Targets Climate Change

by Kathleen Schalch



World Bank President Robert Zoellick answers a reporter's question at a press briefing by senior officials of the Development Committee of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, at IMF Headquarters in Washington, Oct. 21, 2007.

Morning Edition, October 22, 2007 · On Monday, world financial leaders wrap up four days of meetings in Washington at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

They are the first annual meetings for the bank's new president, Robert Zoellick.

He has been working to rebuild morale at the bank and set an ambitious agenda for its future. One key goal is a new focus on climate change.

Zoellick talks about climate change at practically every chance he gets, and this weekend meeting was no exception.

Zoellick said he is worried about China's coal fired power plants. "In 2005, China was, on average, building a new coal-fired, electricity-generating plant every other day," he said.

He said technology might help by capturing carbon dioxide from such plants and storing it underground, and the World Bank can help rich countries pay poor countries to cut emissions.

And he said the bank must do more to prepare developing countries for the disproportionate impact climate change will have on them.

Under Zoellick's predecessor, Paul Wolfowitz, there was not a lot of talk about climate change, and even the words fell out of favor. Officials substituted phrases like "clean energy."

Laura Tucker, who directs the bank's sustainable development program for Latin America and the Caribbean, said the bank has made addressing problems caused by climate change one of its top priorities in the last year.

Latin America and the Caribbean are among the regions where development experts fear climate change could undo decades of efforts to fight poverty. She used Peru as an example because the country depends on melting glaciers for water and hydroelectric power in the winter. She said the glaciers could be gone in 25 to 40 years.

The bank is using new, advanced mapping and modeling techniques to help the country understand what is coming and how to prepare.

David Wheeler, of the Center for Global Development, said the bank is also grappling with new scientific findings on how climate change will affect poor farmers and food supplies.

"Losses in agricultural productivity during the next 70 to 80 years in major regions of the developing world will be enormous, possibly as high as 50 to 60 percent in some regions," he said.

The bank is now revamping its programs, factoring climate change into everything from seed research and irrigation to city planning and road building.

In the past year, its spending on renewable energy and energy efficiency has jumped 67 percent. This month, it launched a new fund that will pay poor people not to cut down trees.

Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, said this will be crucial.

"Cutting down trees — deforestation — actually accounts for about 20 percent of the green house gas emissions we, human beings, are responsible for," de Boer said.

There is only so much even the World Bank can do, de Boer said. The developing world is hungry for power. People want cars and appliances.

"Basically, the challenge is to ensure the developing countries don't follow the development path of the West," he said, adding that

emerging nations need to "immediately leap frog to clean technologies."

Of course, the bank cannot begin to put together the trillions of dollars that would take. But if nations agree to make that kind of investment, Zoellick says the bank is ready to help.