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CO₂ emissions booming, shifting East, researchers report

OAK RIDGE, Tenn., Sept. 25, 2008 – Despite widespread concern about climate change, carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels and manufacturing cement have grown by 38 percent since 1992, from 6.1 billion tons of carbon in 1992 to 8.5 billion tons in 2007.

At the same time, the source of emissions has shifted dramatically as energy use has been growing slowly in many developed countries but more quickly in some developing countries, most notably in rapidly developing Asian countries such as China and India. These are the findings of an analysis completed by the Department of Energy's Carbon Dioxide Information Center at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

“The U.S. was the largest emitter of CO₂ in 1992, followed in order by China, Russia, Japan and India,” said Gregg Marland of ORNL's Environmental Sciences Division. “The most recent estimates suggest that India passed Japan in 2002, China became the largest emitter in 2006, and India is poised to pass Russia to become the third largest emitter, probably this year.”

The latest estimates of annual emissions of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere indicate that emissions are continuing to grow rapidly and that the pattern of emissions has changed markedly since the drafting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992. It was then that the international community expressed concern about limiting emissions of greenhouse gases.

In the Kyoto Protocol, 38 developed countries initially agreed to limit their emissions of greenhouse gases in an effort to minimize their potential impact on the Earth's climate system. At the time of drafting the United Nations Convention, those 38 countries were responsible for 62 percent of carbon dioxide emissions attributable to all countries. By the time the Kyoto Protocol was drafted in 1997 that fraction was down to 57 percent.

The recent emissions estimates show that by the time the Kyoto Protocol came into force in 2005 those 38 countries were the source of less than half of the national total of emissions (an estimated 49.7 percent), and this value as of 2007 was 47 percent. More than half of global emissions are now from the so-called “developing countries.” The Kyoto Protocol has been ratified by 181 countries, but not by the U.S.

Marland emphasizes that these emissions numbers are subject to some uncertainty – about 5 percent for the U.S. but possibly as much as 20 percent for China. “These are our best estimates, but precise numbers cannot be known with certainty,” he said. One implication of the rising importance of emissions from countries with less certain energy data is that estimates of total global emissions are becoming less certain over time.

While this national distribution of emissions is significant in the context of international agreements like the Kyoto Protocol, its practical significance is less clear in a world linked by international commerce, co-author Jay Gregg of the University of Maryland noted. A recent study has estimated, for example, that a third of CO₂ emissions from China in 2005 were due to production of goods for export. Current estimates of national CO₂ emissions show simply the amount of CO₂ emitted from within a country and do not take into consideration the impact of international trade in goods and services or the energy used in international travel and transport.

The new estimates of CO₂ emissions are based on energy data through 2005 from the United Nations, cement data through 2005 from the U.S. Geological Survey, energy data for 2006 and 2007 from BP, and extrapolations by Marland, Gregg and co-authors Tom Boden and Bob Andres of ORNL. The new data include downward revisions of estimates for recent years, but the trends are not changed.

More information is available at the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center web site (<http://cdiac.esd.ornl.gov/>). The center is supported by DOE's Climate Change Research Division within the Office of Biological and Environmental Research.

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NOTES TO EDITORS: These findings will be discussed in the context of global carbon cycle Friday at a forum at the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., and another at the Paris Observatory in France by Josep Canadel and Michael Raupach of the Global Carbon Project.

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