

Greenhouse gas ocean burial okayed from Feb 10



By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

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International rules allowing burial of greenhouse gases beneath the seabed enter into force on Saturday in what will be a step toward fighting global warming, if storage costs are cut and leaks can be averted.

The new rules will permit industrialists to capture heat-trapping gases from big emitters such as coal-fired power plants or steel mills and entomb them offshore -- slowing warming while allowing continued use of fossil fuels.

"Storage of carbon dioxide under the seabed will be allowed from February 10, 2007 under amendments to an international agreement governing the dumping of wastes at sea," the U.N.'s International Maritime Organization (IMO) said in a statement.

The new rules, agreed upon in November, amend the U.N.'s London Convention on dumping at sea. Its text had been unclear about whether carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas emitted mainly by burning fossil fuels, counted as a pollutant.

The changes apply to oceans worldwide and could clear the way to more investment in future subsea carbon storage by governments and companies, despite criticism by environmentalists that there are few safeguards against leaks.

"This removes a lack of clarity and doubt for investors," said Tore Torp, carbon dioxide storage adviser at Norwegian oil group Statoil which opened the world's first commercial store of carbon dioxide in the North Sea in 1996.

A 2005 U.N. report, however, warned that such storage would only be widely applied if the penalty for emitting carbon dioxide to the atmosphere was \$25-\$30 a ton -- far above current prices in a European Union market.

It said carbon burial could be one of the top contributors to slowing warming this century. And in Paris last week, top climate scientists warned that global warming could bring rising seas, more floods, storms and heatwaves by 2100.

ACID, LEAKS

Statoil's view has been that previous rules on ocean storage already allowed carbon burial. On land, national laws generally govern burial of carbon dioxide.

Greenpeace, which has branded subsea storage as illegal dumping in the past, said the revisions were too hasty.

"We think the London Convention has not taken objections seriously -- such as who will be responsible for leaks, who will oversee the storage, who will clean up," he said.

Carbon dioxide is not toxic but can lead to acidification of sea water, making it hard for creatures from shrimp to oysters to build shells. In heavy concentrations above ground it can displace air and so asphyxiate animals and plants.

The amendments pave the way for carbon storage in "sub-seabed geological formations" and say gases injected must consist "overwhelmingly" of carbon dioxide with no added waste.

Torp said there was uncertainty about what "overwhelmingly" meant -- emissions from a coal-fired power plant, for instance, might include some toxic sulphur dioxide.

Statoil has injected about nine million tones of carbon dioxide in rocks far below its Sleipner gas field in the past decade, with no signs of leaks, Torp said. Following Sleipner, two other big carbon storage sites are in operation in Canada and Algeria and more are planned.

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