

Cities Most Innovative in Global Warming Fight

WASHINGTON - In an increasingly urban world, the most innovative ideas in the fight against global climate change are coming from cities and local initiatives, an environmental think-tank reported Wednesday.

The report by the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute noted the international trend toward city-dwelling, with 49 percent of the world's population living in cities in 2005. Soon, and for the first time in human history, more people will live in cities than in rural areas, the report's authors said.

When it comes to combating the effects of global warming, cities and other local governments often -- but not always -- lead the way, said Molly O'Meara Sheehan, project director of the report, "State of the World 2007".

"That's certainly where you see innovation, at the local level, whether it's mayors, whether it's community works or companies struggling to figure out how they can proceed," Sheehan said at a news conference.

Among examples of innovative projects the group cited were a move toward urban farming in Freetown, Sierra Leone and a push to let the vast majority of households in Rizhao, China, get solar-warmed water heaters plus powering traffic signals and street lights with solar cells. Also, in Bogota, Columbia, rapid transit has been improved with a system likened to a street-level subway.

Efforts by cities and other local governments are only part of the picture, with many national governments joining together to limit the emission of greenhouse gases that spur global warming. But not all developed countries support this effort, leaving the field clear for local action. And in the developing world, local efforts may have quicker impact than national plans that have little support.

Asked whether the US national government was "dropping the ball" in this effort, Sheehan responded yes, when it comes to the topic of energy.

One reason this may be occurring in the United States and some other developed countries like Japan is the traditional national influence of rural interests, Sheehan said.

A BILLION CITY DWELLERS

Christopher Flavin, Worldwatch president, suggested one reason this is occurring in the United States and elsewhere is because the big industries that hold sway at the national level often don't wield much power at the local level.

"There obviously are some particular industries that are resisting this change: the coal industry, the oil industry, the power industry," Flavin said at the news conference. "And those have big national constituencies in many cases. But if you go to an individual city, those kinds of industries do not tend to be powerful political forces."

A century ago, most of the world's people lived in the countryside, but by next year, more than half of all people will live in urban areas. Over 60 million people -- about the population of France -- are added to cities and suburbs each year, mostly in low-income settlements in developing countries, the report said.

Of the 3 billion who live in cities now, about 1 billion live in slums, which the report defined as areas without such basic necessities as clean water, a nearby toilet or durable housing.

Story by Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent