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Carbon emissions show biggest jump ever recorded

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Global emissions of carbon dioxide from fossil-fuel burning jumped by the largest amount on record last year, upending the notion that the brief decline during the recession might persist through the recovery.

Emissions rose 5.9 percent in 2010, according to an analysis released Sunday by the Global Carbon Project, an international collaboration of scientists tracking the numbers. Scientists with the group said the increase was almost certainly the largest absolute jump in any year since the Industrial Revolution.

The researchers said the high growth rate reflected a bounce-back from the 1.4 percent drop in emissions in 2009, the year the recession had its biggest impact.

In the United States, emissions dropped by a remarkable 7 percent in the recession year of 2009, but rose by just over 4 percent last year, the new analysis shows. This country is the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, pumping 1.5 billion tons of carbon into the atmosphere last year. The United States was surpassed several years ago by China, where emissions grew 10.4 percent in 2010.

The figures come as delegates from 191 countries meet in Durban, South Africa, for yet another negotiating session. "Each year that emissions go up, there's another year of negotiations, another year of indecision," said Glen P. Peters, a researcher at the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo and a leader of the group that produced the new analysis. "There's no evidence that this trajectory we've been following the last 10 years is going to change."

Scientists say the rapid growth of emissions is warming the Earth, threatening the ecology and putting human welfare at long-term risk. But their increasingly urgent pleas that society find a way to limit emissions have met sharp political resistance in many countries, including the United States, because doing so would entail higher energy costs.

The new figures show a continuation of a trend in which developing countries, including China (2.2 billion tons of carbon in 2010), have surpassed the wealthy countries in their overall greenhouse emissions.

Emissions per person, though, are still sharply higher in the wealthy countries, and those countries have been emitting greenhouse gases far longer. The level of carbon dioxide has increased 40 percent since the Industrial Revolution.

On the surface, the figures of recent years suggest that wealthy countries have made headway in stabilizing their emissions. But Dr. Peters pointed out that in a sense, the rich countries have simply exported some of them. The fast rise in developing countries has been caused to a large extent by the growth of energy-intensive manufacturing industries that make goods that rich countries import. "All that has changed is the location in which the emissions are being produced," Dr. Peters said.

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