

REPORT ON THE
FOURTH CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES
TO THE UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONVENTION (COP4)
November 2-14, 1998 in Buenos Aires

SUMMARY:

The Fourth Conference of the Parties to the climate change convention concluded on 14 November in Buenos Aires with agreement on an Action Plan. The Buenos Aires Action Plan aims to strengthen the implementation of the Convention and prepare for the future entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol, and to maintain political momentum towards these aims. The action plan covers a number of elements, covering both developed and developing country priorities. Canada's primary interest was to seek agreement on agreeing to an end date for final decisions on the Kyoto mechanisms -- joint implementation, the Clean Development Mechanism and international emissions trading. That objective was met when Parties agreed to seek a final decision on all the mechanisms by the sixth conference of the Parties. Canada also made excellent progress on the issue of sinks and succeeded in gaining the attention of most Parties in seeking to garner support for the inclusion of agricultural soils as a legitimate sequestration activity.

2. The negotiations were difficult and protracted, characterized by fairly rigid block diplomacy. The package represented by the plan of action essentially represents the compilation of core interests of each block: mechanisms for the Umbrella Group, technology transfer and impacts decisions for the G-77, with the EU holding out for progress on policies and measures and a decision covering the Global Environment Facility. Dynamics were also characterized by hardball tactics amongst a core group of developing countries who continue to hold sway over the G-77: China, India and OPEC nations. On developing country commitments, Argentina and Kazakhstan both announced their intention to take on emission mitigation commitments by CoP 5. This represents an important precedent as it is the first time that developing countries have agreed to take on their own emission limitation commitments. Otherwise, developing countries opposed any effort that might lead to a formalized track including commitments on their part at this time. One highlight of the session was the USA signature of the Protocol (12 November), with a proviso that it will only move forward on ratification if there is meaningful participation by key developing countries.

3. While the overall package is modest, concrete timelines and a process for addressing outstanding issues represents an achievement, and should help to send out a signal to stakeholders that Kyoto targets are a reality. With a two year time-frame now to get the package right, COP 6, expected in 2000, is expected to be the real watershed. In the meantime, much effort still needs to be put into confidence building directed at enhancing the