

Keyword: global-warming

Headline: The climate's low-hanging fruit

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Published Date: 01:39 AM September 14, 2016

Section: opinion

Word Count: 759

Content:

NEW YORK—Next month, signatories to the 1989 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer will convene in Kigali, Rwanda, to consider an amendment to the treaty that would gradually reduce, and eventually eliminate, the use of hydrofluorocarbons or HFCs. One of the six main greenhouse gases, HFCs are commonly used in air conditioners and refrigeration systems worldwide.

The amendment would be a boon for sustainable development, and could prevent the release of as much as 100-200 billion tons of climate-changing emissions by 2050. That would be enough to take the world a quarter of the way toward achieving the 2° Celsius global-warming target set by the December 2015 Paris climate agreement.

The Montreal Protocol was established to repair the ozone layer, which protects all life on the planet from deadly levels of ultraviolet rays. So far, it has been a remarkable success, with nearly 100 ozone-destroying chemicals phased out over the past three decades. The ozone layer is healing and, according to the latest estimates, it could recover by 2065, saving trillions of dollars in global healthcare and agriculture costs.

Much of this improvement is thanks to HFCs (which are excellent ozone-friendly alternatives to older chlorofluorocarbons) that have been phased out. However, HFCs, some of which are 4,000 times more potent as greenhouse gases than carbon dioxide, are a disaster for climate change, and their use is still increasing annually by 10 percent.

It thus makes sense to focus on HFCs in taking action on climate change. For starters, reducing them can yield economic benefits, owing to the significant energy-efficiency improvements afforded by newer air-conditioning and refrigeration systems. Just phasing in more efficient air-conditioning systems would be the emissions equivalent of retiring 2,500 medium-size peak power plants (power plants that come on-stream during periods of high demand, such as during the summer).

In China, switching to climate-friendly refrigerants and boosting the energy efficiency of air conditioning and refrigeration could lead to the equivalent in emissions savings of eight Three Gorges hydroelectric dams. In India, the switch could be equal to two more of the Indian government's current National Solar Mission, which promotes solar-energy penetration and the construction of new rooftop and ground-mounted solar plants.

Many countries—including the European Union and the United States, as well as Belize, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Egypt, Serbia and Yemen—already recognize these far-reaching benefits and are taking unilateral action to phase out HFCs. A strong HFCs agreement in Kigali would add momentum to these efforts and provide financial support for developing countries that want to move to newer technologies but currently can't afford it.

In the private sector, retail giants such as Walmart, Nestle, and Tesco have joined the Consumer Goods Forum, a cooperative climate initiative, and agreed to phase out products with HFCs. The United Nations and Greenpeace, through an initiative called "Refrigerants, Naturally!," are working with Coca-Cola, Pepsico, Redbull and Unilever to do the same.

The Kigali meeting is set to yield a strong HFCs amendment. However, some countries in especially hot parts of the world heavily worry that climate-friendly alternatives for their essential air conditioning may not function as well. Any agreement can account for those concerns through a temporary exemption for those countries, while others move ahead with newer systems to demonstrate their effectiveness.

A warming planet is already having a devastating impact on some of the world's most vulnerable populations, and it will only continue to do so. Ultimately, all countries will have to find a way forward in reducing HFCs and climate change generally, through national action plans and emissions reductions agreed to under the 2015 Paris agreement. Frameworks established by sister agreements like the Montreal Protocol can help to do this.

HFCs will also be a central topic at the next major UN climate change conference, COP22, which convenes in Marrakesh, Morocco, in November. We are confident that the governments preparing to meet in Kigali understand the need for a strong HFCs amendment, which would give momentum to other agenda items, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in Marrakesh.

If the world is to succeed in quickly reducing global emissions to prevent climate change from reaching catastrophic levels, reducing HFCs is a sensible—perhaps the most sensible—first step.
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