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Minister admits Kyoto targets unrealistic

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OTTAWA — Environmentalists are calling on the federal cabinet to stick with its original Kyoto plan and not relax emissions-cutting targets for large industrial polluters as proposed by the Department of Natural Resources.

But Natural Resources Minister John Efford says there is no way large industrial emitters can achieve the original target — a 55-megatonne cut in annual emissions from business-as-usual projections for 2010.

Efford hinted that a 37-megatonne cut might be attainable, and people working on the file say that could become the new target. The revised figure would amount to 10 per cent of emissions from large sources.

"We've agreed on one thing — that 55 megatonnes is a number that's not realistic," Efford told reporters in Edmonton.

"If the 55 megatonnes cannot be accomplished . . . why don't we talk about best practices? Why don't we accomplish 37 megatonnes or whatever megatonnes?"

"Isn't that something Canadians want — to know that industry, governments are protecting the environment?"

"Best practices" means using the most efficient technology available.

Insiders say a minority government likely could not withstand the industrial lobbying that would be unleashed if Ottawa stuck to the 55-megatonne target in its original plan, but some believe a 10 per cent target might fly.

Large industrial emitters such as oil and gas producers, electricity generators, mines and manufacturers account for about half of Canada's greenhouse emissions. The rest come from small businesses, governments and individuals.

The Canadian Press reported Sunday that a proposal by the Natural Resources Department would allow industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by as little as eight megatonnes a year.

Environmentalists say a drastic cut would leave Canada clearly unable to meet its commitments under the Kyoto treaty and would damage the country's credibility.

"Kyoto can be met, but if we give such a large break to large industrial emitters it essentially binds the

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government's hands," said Dale Marshall of the David Suzuki Foundation.

Canada's Kyoto target is to reduce total emissions by six per cent from the 1990 level by about 2010. Environmentalists say the Natural Resources plan would see greenhouse emissions rise 27 per cent.

The Natural Resources proposal is in the hands of the cabinet committee on sustainable development, chaired by Industry Minister David Emerson. An official said it will likely be at least three weeks before the proposal is reviewed.

The government is under pressure to come up with a feasible Kyoto plan by the time the treaty enters legal force Feb. 16.

Natural Resources is the lead department on the Kyoto file, not Environment. The two departments have a long history of conflict, and environmentalists say Environment should have the lead.

"We know there are those in the government who actually want to make this achievement, but we have a problem with the Department of Natural Resources which has traditionally sided with industry," said John Bennett of the Sierra Club.

Environment Minister Stephane Dion was not available. He was meeting with California officials to discuss the state's plan to regulate greenhouse emissions from vehicles.

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