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Kyoto Global Warming Conference Some questions and answers about HFCs

1. What was achieved at the Kyoto Conference?

At the third Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Kyoto December 1-10 a new Protocol on climate change was agreed. Despite fears that participating countries might be unable to broker an agreement acceptable to all, a consensus finally emerged that greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming can be reduced by the years 2008-2012. The developed nations at the summit agreed to reduction targets ranging from 8% in the European Union to a 10% increase in Iceland. In between those two extremes, the United States has agreed to a 7% reduction and other countries will aim to stabilize emissions at 1990 levels. The overall reduction will be 5.2%. Developing countries did not agree to any quantified emission reductions.

2. Why is Kyoto significant for the fire protection industry?

The industry can be pleased to see global warming at the top of the international agenda since fire protection is intrinsically an environmentally-friendly activity which prevents damaging emissions caused directly by fires. Furthermore, natural resources are saved by averting the need for goods and materials to replace those lost through fire, the manufacture of which would have a global warming impact.

3. What does the Kyoto Protocol say about HFCs?

Carbon dioxide, by far and away the largest contributor to global warming, was the focus of discussion throughout the conference, but HFCs, methane, nitrous oxide, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride are also included. Emission targets will be calculated as an aggregate of all six gases.

The only specific reference to HFCs allows a choice between 1990 or 1995 as the base year for emission calculations.

4. Does the Protocol threaten the use of HFC agents such as FM200® in fire protection?

No. It is important to recognize that the Protocol in no way suggests a ban on the use of HFCs, whether in fire protection or other uses. Kyoto was concerned with limiting emissions of global warming gases. Since fire protection is a non-emissive application except in the rare event of a fire, the Protocol should therefore have little or no effect on the use of HFCs in fire protection, providing that industry continues to demonstrate the need for and responsible use of these products. It is worth remembering, too, that FM200® has the lowest global warming potential of the new fluorocarbon agents. What is more, at the end of the life of the system, the extinguishing agent can be easily recovered.



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5. What happens next?

The Kyoto document will be open for signature from March 1998, but the provisions of the Protocol will not come into force until at least 55 Parties to the Convention (whose combined CO₂ emissions for 1990 must equal at least 55% of the total) have ratified the deal within their own countries. Significantly, it is known that the United States legislature bears serious reservations about the Protocol and may delay or even deny ratification. In the meantime, it is crucially important the fire protection industry continues to assist national authorities and the European Union in developing policies and measures to reduce emissions. One possible way forward is through voluntary regional agreements with governments which are widely used in the United Kingdom and Europe.

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