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Pacific Island Strategy Targets Fastest Growing Greenhouse Gas

Reducing factory-made HFCs best strategy for slowing sea level rise, other near-term impacts

Washington, DC, May 14, 2012 – With prospects for a comprehensive climate treaty now delayed until 2020, the Federated States of Micronesia is calling on the 197 Parties to the Montreal Protocol to strengthen climate protection under that treaty by phasing down the production and use of the super-greenhouse gases known as hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs).

"Reducing HFCs is critical for slowing sea level rise in the short-term," said Ambassador Asterio Takesy of the Federated States of Micronesia. "In Durban the world agreed to develop a new climate plan by 2015 to go into effect in 2020, but we need action now, and an agreement to phase down HFCs under the Montreal Protocol is the best strategy this year. We're asking all at-risk islands and coastal states to join us to ensure a successful outcome this year," he added.

HFCs are factory-made chemicals used in refrigeration and insulating foams and have a warming effect hundreds to thousands of times more potent than carbon dioxide, the principle greenhouse gas. Phasing down HFCs through the Micronesian plan would be equivalent to preventing 100 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.

"Phasing down HFCs is the biggest, fastest, cheapest piece of climate mitigation available to the world in the next few years," said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development. "This courageous island is helping all vulnerable nations with what will be the world's best near-term plan to slow climate change."

HFCs are potent greenhouse gases but do not destroy the ozone layer, so were initially considered acceptable substitutes for hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), which both warm the planet and damage the ozone layer, and are currently being phased out under the Montreal Protocol. An amendment to the Protocol presents developing country Parties the opportunity to leapfrog HFC gases altogether and transition into ozone- and climate-friendly alternatives.

"A key political point for developing countries," said Romina Picolotti, former Minister of Environment for Argentina, "is that the Montreal Protocol fully implements the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' by providing funding for developing countries to reduce controlled chemicals, delaying obligations for developing countries for several years after the developed countries must enact their controls, and supporting capacity building."

As a direct result of the ongoing phase-out of HCFCs, HFCs are the fastest growing greenhouse gases in many countries including the US, where they grew nearly 9% between 2009 and 2010. Without fast action to limit their growth, the climate forcing of HFCs could equal nearly 20% of CO_2 emissions by 2050, or about the same as current annual emissions from transport, and up to 45% of carbon dioxide emissions if those emissions are limited in line with present international goals.

Micronesia has a history of success at bringing about effective climate mitigation under the Montreal Protocol. In 2007, the Montreal Protocol Parties agreed to an historic Micronesian proposal to accelerate the phase-out of HCFCs. Since then, support for phasing down the substitute HFCs under the Montreal Protocol has been steadily increasing. Since 2011, over 108 nations have followed Micronesia's lead in calling for HFCs to be replaced with chemicals that have a low impact on global warming.

Initial discussions on the new Micronesian proposal will be at the Montreal Protocol's Open-Ended Working Group meeting July 23-27 in Bangkok, with the final decision at the Meeting of the Parties November 12-16 in Geneva. The Micronesia proposal is here: http://conf.montreal-protocol.org/meeting/oewg/oewg-32/presession/PreSession%20Documents/OEWG-32-5E.pdf. A similar proposal by North American parties is here: http://conf.montreal-protocol.org/meeting/oewg/oewg-32/presession/PreSession%20Documents/OEWG-32-6E.pdf.