



# Turning up the heat on our environmental targets

The lobby for **carbon** taxes is growing in strength, writes **Claire O'Sullivan**



**F**OR all our talk about green issues, we have largely ignored the Kyoto protocol (but remember the European indignation when the Bush regime dismissed the talks in 2001).

This week, director of the Environmental Protection Agency, Mary Kelly, made it clear that meeting the Kyoto 2012 and EU 2020 targets will be "extremely challenging" and called for the campaign to reduce domestic emissions to be intensified.

The EPA estimates our emissions, rather than falling by 3% each year, rose by 5% last year.

EPA Climate Change unit programme manager, Dr Ken Macken thinks we could yet meet Kyoto targets by purchasing **carbon** credits, from other countries that are under their target. However, the EU targets are slipping away fast as the non-trading sector — with the **agriculture**, transport and energy sectors the main culprits — is on course to exceed the EU proposed target by seven million tonnes.

**Claire O'Sullivan**

"Very significant increases must be made in alternative energy usage while reducing greenhouse gases in the **agricultural** and transport sectors is vital," Dr Macken said. He has called for forest "sinks" to be developed — forests on previously un-forested land that can help capture greenhouse emissions.

Economic and Social Research Institute Research Professor John Fitzgerald described Ireland's attitude to greenhouse gases as "all talk and no action".

"We won't meet the targets. It takes 20 years to change transport habits for example. We were all talk and no action and the EU were just the same.

"People don't buy new cars every year and neither do they build new homes regularly. With transport alone, it will take at least 10 years before, with the help of incentives, you get significant numbers of people driving environmental cars and living in efficient homes. People also need to seriously reduce their reliance on cars," he said.

With the ESRI predicting that it will be another two years before the economy picks up, there's one solution that can't be put off any longer, according to John Fitzgerald — **carbon** taxes.

"It especially makes sense now when tax income is dropping so sharply. We won't see the results for a decade, but it will send out a sharp signal immediately to consumers who will then

begin to change their behaviour," he said.

**Agriculture** is one of the main contributors to our greenhouse gas splurge with the finger being

pointed at methaneous cows and nitrogen oxide emissions from fertilisers. The Irish Farmers Association has said it believes "farmers can make a contribution" to the emission reductions.

Energy Minister Eamon Ryan described the EPA's projections as "a real challenge" but "one the Government is determined to meet by creating jobs in the new eco-tech sector".

But lecturer in energy engineering at UCC Brian O'Gallachoir thinks we are paying for dragging our heels.

"We have grown quickly as an economy which makes it difficult. But that was taken into account in our target which was to limit growth (to 13% above 1990 levels) rather than to reduce emissions. We did not develop and implement effective, timely policies and measures to curb growth in emissions," he said.

"We did make some progress in improving electricity generation efficiency. We grew our contribution from renewable energy and we made some progress in efficiency in industry. It was too little too late however and could not counter the huge growth in transport or the effects of a massive construction programme of new houses — units that were built to poor energy performance standards. In transport, emissions from private cars more than doubled since 1990 and emissions from freight transport more than three fold."

Mr O'Gallachoir believes our emissions will drop in coming years in spite of ourselves.

"The Kyoto target applies to the years 2008 to 2012 and the current revised thinking of where our economy is going will mean we are likely to earn less, use less energy and as a result have lower emissions than projected."

But the economic slowdown will not be enough. The time is now, says Prof Fitzgerald.

**Carbon** taxes. Changes to our planning laws so the car isn't so vital, congestion charges and improved public transport have to be instigated as a matter of priority. Our culture needs to change and that doesn't happen overnight," he said.



EPA's Mary Kelly wants **carbon** campaign intensified.