

Cownie joins Redford to fight global warming

Thirty-nine mayors are taking part in a Utah summit spearheaded by the actor.

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Actor and environmentalist Robert Redford welcomes U.S. mayors, including Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie, to the Sundance Summit on Monday in Utah.

Actor and environmentalist Robert Redford has gathered 39 U.S. mayors, including Frank Cownie of Des Moines, at his Sundance Resort in Utah for a summit on global warming.

The sessions at the resort near Provo, Utah, focus on what cities can do to fight emissions of heat-trapping "greenhouse" gases, emitted by vehicles and coal-burning facilities such as a proposed ethanol plant Des Moines is eyeing for a southeast industrial park.

Cownie was invited by the Sundance Preserve, which is paying the mayors' expenses. Cownie has been an outspoken proponent of cutting greenhouse gas emissions, has pushed the city to use hybrid vehicles, and wants tax breaks for energy-efficient commercial construction.

In an interview with The Des Moines Register, Redford said he grew tired of watching what he called the Bush administration's "inaction" on global warming. Last year, Redford gathered 45 mayors - including Chicago's and San Francisco's - in a test run. This year, he had hoped for 60 mayors, but a snowstorm, the elections and a federal holiday held some back.

Still, this year's group plans to issue a report on Wednesday, pushing ways that cities can lead the way by cutting emissions locally. The summit ends Wednesday.

"I think mayors are very important ingredients, and they are at the level of government closest to the people," Redford said. "They are a group replacing inactivity with proactivity. We have had no leadership at the top on this issue for years, but lately we have even seen denial there even is a problem. It's a very tragic position for us."

Redford is looking for action on renewable fuels, energy-efficient buildings, tax credits for "green construction" and changes in city facilities to cut emissions. He would like to see airports stop planes from idling so long while crews wait for clearance to fly. "Do they have to leave their engines on all that time?" Redford asked.

Dozens of leading scientists, including Iowa native James Hansen, NASA's chief climate scientist, have warned that not only has the atmosphere warmed in recent decades, but

the changes may be irreversible if emissions aren't reduced beginning this decade. They warn of inundated coastal areas and more frequent hurricanes.

A small minority of scientists disagree with that stance.

In an interview, Cownie said he was invited because he is a leader in the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, a group that is co-sponsoring the Sundance Summit. Des Moines is serving as the clearinghouse for the Midwestern work of the council, which is analyzing emissions across the area.

Cownie said he hopes Des Moines' work - which will include retrofitting dozens of city buildings and converting city equipment and vehicles to more-efficient fuels - will spread throughout Iowa and beyond.

In addition, Cownie has pushed the city to buy hybrid vehicles. The city is looking into alternative fuel sources and replacing old stoplights with energy-efficient models. Cownie formed the Mayor's Task Force on Energy and the Environment, bringing together a diverse group of residents who want to do their part to stop global warming and conserve energy.

At the same time, Cownie has endorsed an ethanol plant that would burn coal, at least initially. A competitor would burn natural gas, which is far less polluting and not as big a contributor to global warming.

Redford declined to comment on that controversy, saying he didn't know enough about the plans.