



President Donald Trump claims that the Paris climate agreement is “unfair” to the United States.

POLITICS

Trump says no to climate pact

United States set to withdraw from the 2015 Paris accord.

BY JEFF TOLLEFSON

President Donald Trump’s decision on 1 June to withdraw the United States from the 2015 Paris climate agreement has left many scientists frustrated and dismayed. More than 190 nations agreed to the pact in December 2015, pledging to hold average global temperatures to 1.5–2 °C above pre-industrial levels.

“This decision condemns the United States to becoming one of the ‘has-beens’ of history,” says Benjamin Santer, a climate scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. “We will become increasingly irrelevant to the rest of the world.”

Speaking in the White House Rose Garden, Trump said the Paris agreement was “unfair” to the United States and suggested that the country would attempt to negotiate a new climate commitment. He added that the United States would immediately stop implementing its Paris pledges, including contributions to the Green Climate Fund to help developing countries deal with the effects of climate change.

But the president’s arguments puzzled many researchers, who noted that the Paris agreement gives countries the leeway to determine their contributions. “The genius of Paris is to allow countries to put forward

emissions pledges that [they] feel they can meet,” says Glen Peters, a climate-policy expert at the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo. “The US pledge was put forward by the US, alone.”

Others objected to the statistics and economic projections that Trump cited in explaining his decision — such as a study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. According to Trump, the analysis found that the Paris agreement would produce “two-tenths of 1 °C reduction in global temperature by the year 2100”; the research actually concluded that the pact would slow warming by 0.6 to 1.1 °C.

“President Trump’s speech attempting to justify his decision was an amazing concentrate of some of the worst climate confusers’ and fossil lobbyists’ arguments,” says Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, a climate scientist at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, and former vice-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The mechanics of the US exit are complicated. The terms of the Paris agreement prevent the United States from withdrawing from the pact for four years, which means that the final word on US participation would not come before November 2020 — around the time of the next presidential election.

Meanwhile, the United States remains a party

to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the foundational agreement under which the Paris accord was negotiated. This means that the country is likely to participate to some degree in international climate talks, just as it did when former president George W. Bush pulled out of another global climate pact — the 1997 Kyoto Protocol — in 2001.

In a statement, the UNFCCC said that the Paris agreement “cannot be renegotiated based on the request of a single Party”.

Trump’s announcement fulfills one of his campaign promises and plays well to his core Republican supporters. But the White House has faced fierce pressure to participate in the Paris agreement from the leaders of other nations, who have vowed to push forward with or without the United States. China, which became the world’s largest greenhouse-gas emitter more than a decade ago, has said that it will continue to uphold its Paris pledge.

China is rumoured to be negotiating a new climate partnership with the European Union. But it is not clear whether China and the EU can offset the leadership void left by the United States, which played a major part in negotiating the Paris agreement.

“I think it’s very hard to fill the American shoes here,” says David Victor, a climate-policy researcher at the University of California, San Diego. “This is more about the diminishing of American leadership and credibility than about the rise of others.” He says that even before Trump intervened, the United States was probably not going to meet its Paris commitment, and many other industrialized countries are likely to come up short.

The US decision does not yet spell doom for the climate itself, says Niklas Höhne, a founding partner at the NewClimate Institute in Cologne, Germany. That’s because big companies and US states have said that they will continue to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions, and energy markets are shifting away from coal and towards renewable energies.

An analysis by the Climate Action Tracker, a consortium of researchers, suggests that climate-change policies instituted by Obama would have cut US greenhouse-gas emissions by 10% below 2005 levels by 2025. That is well short of the country’s Paris pledge to reduce emissions by 26% over the same period.

The consortium also estimates that US emissions would remain relatively flat if Trump succeeds in rolling back those Obama policies, increasing the country’s total greenhouse-gas emissions by 400 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030, compared with previous projections. By contrast, the analysis finds, China’s and India’s efforts to shift from coal to renewable energy are gaining momentum, and could reduce projected global emissions growth by 2–3 gigatonnes of CO₂ by 2030. ■

Additional reporting by Quirin Schiermeier.