THE TRUMP EFFECT ON CLIMATE POLICY: HARD TIMES FOR GLOBAL CLIMATE ACTION

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Introduction

On March 28, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump issued an Executive Order titled “Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth.” This new policy change by the Trump administration can be seen not only as a setback for U.S. climate and energy policies but also as a blow to international climate action as a whole.

Since Election Day (November 8, 2017), which coincided with the second day of the latest UN Climate Conference (COP 22) in Marrakech, the international climate community had been anticipating a major change in U.S. climate policy. In a clear departure from the previous Obama administration, Trump and his supporters effectively reject the scientific consensus on climate change and the Paris Agreement. It thus comes as no surprise that within his first 2.5 months in office, President Trump has already reversed a number of key U.S. climate policies. The questionable choices that have been made since Trump’s election for key positions in institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Energy, as well as the slashing of public funds for institutions researching climate science and one of his first Executive Orders reviving the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines, have been less than encouraging signs.

The latest Executive Order is directed at energy and climate policy and aims to completely dismantle all of the efforts to combat climate change made during the Obama era. The only remaining shred of U.S. climate policy is its presence at international climate negotiations, being a Party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement, as well as having submitted its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). Realizing these goals will probably now be impossible given the reversal of domestic climate policy. Therefore, we can read this order as a major turning point and revitalization of the stagnant (if not overtly hostile) George W. Bush period that typified U.S. climate policy before 2008.

This brief paper summarizes the United States’ latest change of policy direction, outlines its damage to international climate action, and elicits impacts the change might have on the U.S. and global climate policy.

President Trump’s Executive Order on Energy and Climate Change

The March 28th Executive Order aimed to repeal the climate and energy policy passed predominantly during the second term of the Obama administration. Some of the main elements of the Obama era climate policy were: a) the President’s Climate Action Plan; b) the Climate Action Plan Strategy to Reduce Methane Emissions; c) the Presidential Memorandum on Power Sector Carbon Pollution Standards; d) the Executive Order on Preparing the U.S. for the Impacts of Climate Change; and e) the Federal Land Coal Leasing Moratorium. Trump’s latest Executive Order repealed these major rules and regulations and more. The Executive Order also mandated that the EPA review its “Clean Power Plan” and disbanded the Interagency Working Group on Social Cost of Greenhouse Gases.

Trump’s Executive Order will likely cause: a) the deregulation of the fossil fuel industry by federal agencies; b) lifting the moratorium on new coal leasing on federal land; c) loosening the pollution standards for coal power plants; d) loosening the methane pollution standards for oil and gas fields; and e) using old calculation methods for the social cost of fossil fuels that disregard the impacts of greenhouse gases.

The framing of the Executive Order is as important as its content. The policy change is justified by using a mix of national interest and free market discourse “to promote clean and safe development of our Nation’s vast energy resources,” “avoiding regulatory burdens,” “regulations that potentially burden the development or use of domestically produced energy resources,” etc. “Burden” is specifically defined in the Order as anything “to unnecessarily obstruct, delay, curtail, or otherwise impose significant costs on the siting, permitting, production, utilization, transmission, or delivery of energy resources.” In addition, buzzwords like “job creation,” “Made in the USA,” “giving their jobs back to the coal miners,” and “clean coal” were used extensively during the announcement of the policy
change. This framing presents everything that is developed to mitigate climate change as an unnecessary burden to the national interest, market economy, and domestic energy production. This discourse is an example of using climate change denialism as a driver for public policy making.4

Although the Trump administration did not withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement, this policy change may destroy climate action both at the domestic and the global level, since the United States is the biggest historical and second biggest contemporary greenhouse gas emitter.

Historical and Contemporary U.S. Emissions

According to an analysis conducted by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the United States has the highest share in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, accounting for 20 percent of cumulative global emissions between 1850 and 2012. The EU owns the second highest share with 17 percent, and China has the third with 12 percent. Rocha et al. stated that “the United States, the European Union, and China are responsible for 20.2%, 17.3%, and 12.1% of global temperature increase in 2100.”5

Cumulative Emissions 2766 Gt

Since 2008, the United States has started to decrease its emissions. In 2014, U.S. emissions were 7.4 percent lower than 2005 emissions.7

Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the U.S. (MT CO₂ eq.)
Following the EPA’s 2015 Clean Power Plan, emissions started to decrease much more quickly in electricity generation, which is the leading sector in GHG emissions. As illustrated in Figure 3, coal production and its consumption in electricity generation followed a downward trend until 2016.³

Figure 3. U.S. net electricity generation and coal production (2000-2016)³
Estimated Emissions Cuts in the U.S.

Millions/billions metric tons CO₂ eq.

Starting point:
6.68 billion metric tons CO₂ eq.

Reductions achieved so far (through 2014)

- 572.3M (33%)
- 267M (15%)
- 160M (9%)
- 146M (8%)
- 114M (7%)
- 78M (4%)
- 48M (3%)
- 34M (2%)
- 27M (2%)

Reductions needed to meet 2025 target:
1.74 billion metric tons CO₂ eq.

- Clean Power Plan
- Refrigeration gases (HFCs)
- Methane reductions in oil & gas
- Building and appliance efficiency
- California GHG and clean energy policies
- Heavy-duty truck efficiency
- Federal buildings
- Other (incl. fertilizer and landfill regulations)
- Obama-era policies would leave a gap of 291 million metric tons, or 17% of the target.

2025 target:
4.94 billion metric tons CO₂ eq.

Figure 4. Estimated emissions cuts from Obama-era policies in the U.S.
(Sources: EPA; Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Infographic by Paul Horn, InsideClimate News)
How Will the Policy Change Impact U.S. Emissions?

Even though the United States remains a party to the Paris Agreement, under the current circumstances it will be much more difficult to fulfill its commitment to reduce GHG emissions. According to its NDC, the United States committed to reduce its emissions 26-28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. This amount of reduction corresponds to approximately 1.7 Gt of reductions by 2025. Analysts claim that the new deregulatory move would lead to this target being missed by 1 Gt.¹¹

Although InsideClimate News calculated (using EPA sources) that even Obama’s policies would have left a gap corresponding to 17 percent of the NDC target, the Trump administration has repealed the bulk of the regulations designed to achieve the majority of the reductions.¹² Therefore, it can be said that the most concrete “Trump effect” on climate policy will be the abolition of the tools needed to reduce emissions, in turn preventing international climate commitments from being reached. Figure 4 shows a breakdown of the reductions that were expected to be achieved through these (now abolished) regulations.

Another important policy of the Obama administration was a moratorium on new coal leases on federal land, which was issued in early 2016.¹⁴ The coal moratorium, combined with the ageing fleet of existing coal power plants leading to increased numbers of closures, and the fact that only a few new coal plants are in the pipeline signaled that coal retreat in the U.S. energy system had been progressing.¹⁵ The latest figures show that the total capacity of new coal power plant projects in the United States is 1,295 MW, and only 582 MW of this is under construction. This corresponds to a very small added capacity compared to the existing coal fleet (287,051 MW), canceled projects between 2010 and 2016 (26,291 MW), and closures in 2015 and 2016 (18,882 MW).¹⁶ Repealing the coal moratorium and positive signals being directed to new coal investments aim to reverse this picture. Also, proposed abolition of pollution standards may increase the emissions from existing coal power plants.

Nevertheless, Trump’s offensive against climate action has not gone unchallenged, and there are several reasons to be optimistic about the future of climate policies.

Firstly, environmental groups, including the United States’ oldest environmentalist organization, the Sierra Club, are preparing to challenge the order in court.¹⁷ The legal background of the climate action in the U.S. is based on a Supreme Court decision in 2007 that, under the authority of the EPA, carbon dioxide must be regulated as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act. If the EPA denies using its authority to control carbon dioxide as a pollutant, it can be brought into court. Likewise, not using the Social Cost of Carbon considering the effects of fossil fuel use can be subject to a court case. Furthermore, reviewing the Clean Power Act requires a complicated process and may take years (also because of possible legal challenges).¹⁸

Secondly, while the Trump administration changes federal policy, many state and local climate policies are being implemented at full steam. For example, the state of California announced its plan to reduce carbon emissions by 40 percent according to 1990 levels by 2030 just hours after Donald Trump took his oath of office on January 20, 2017.¹⁹ In addition, California Senate leader Kevin de Léon introduced an ambitious plan requiring California to produce 100 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2045.²⁰ And not only traditionally “green” states like California but also oil-rich Republican states like Texas are taking their share from renewables. The installed wind capacity of Texas is 20,321 MW, and last year Texas provided 12.68% of its electricity production from wind.²¹ So, state policies and local leaders can disrupt Trump’s plans. Many American officials and experts were confident in the latest UN Climate Conference (COP 22) in Marrakech in 2016 that sub-federal level policies would prevail.²²

Thirdly, global coal recession is expected to continue. Even China and India are aiming to decrease their coal consumption. Although the main motivation behind Trump’s policies is to revitalize a shrinking coal sector in the United States, this may not be as easy as expected. Relatively reduced coal prices, a fracking boom, and coal plant retirements
decrease the importance of coal for the economy and jobs even in “Coal Country.” Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman argued in The New York Times that coal is not about the regional interest of states like West Virginia but rather a cultural symbolism. So, whether ending the coal moratorium and pushing the coal sector will work or not is questionable.

Trump’s latest blow to the Obama-era climate policies is a potential disaster for the global climate. However, developing international climate policies, the role of other big players, and predominately renewable-oriented new market tendencies all have the potential to keep climate action on track.

International Climate Politics After Trump

Whilst the new direction of climate change policy is without a doubt catastrophic for domestic climate policy and does not paint a hopeful picture for emissions reductions, the prognosis for global climate change negotiations is more ambivalent.

It is worth remembering that this is not the first time that a change in administration in the United States has led to a u-turn in its climate policy. In 1998, Al Gore (then Vice President under the Clinton administration) signed the Kyoto Protocol, the predecessor to the Paris Agreement. However, under the George W. Bush administration from 2001 onwards, it became clear that there was no intention of following through with the protocol, and it was never ratified.

The first years of the 21st century were not exactly the high point of climate change negotiations—in 2009, negotiations were meant to result in an agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, a goal that was not ultimately achieved until 2015 with the ushering in of the Paris Agreement. If the United States had played a more prominent role, would the situation have been any different? Quite possibly. But, the climate change negotiations weathered the storm, and a more sympathetic Obama administration was able to make moves on climate change, including leveraging support for the Paris Agreement.

Most visibly, in the run-up to the Paris climate change negotiations in late 2014, the United States and China made a joint announcement that they would work with other countries in order to achieve an agreement in Paris, as well as announcing respective targets for emissions reductions. The importance of this announcement cannot be underestimated. In the crucial final stages of negotiations, it gave a much-needed motivation boost, with the world’s two largest emitters being on board.

However, now it seems that moving forward the United States cannot be counted on to join in the game at all, let alone take on a leadership role. The future success of the global climate change negotiations may therefore hinge on other countries stepping up to fill this void. If other countries take current U.S. policy as a signal that they also do not need to take action on climate change, the consequences could be catastrophic, and the negotiations might disintegrate. However, if, for example, China steps up to the plate, as it has been quite vocal in recent weeks, and indeed hits their emissions peak in 2025 (five years ahead of the 2030 target) as some are predicting, as well as keeping up the pressure on other countries to stick to the Paris Agreement, progress might just be possible.

So, whilst Trump’s Executive Order is quite plainly disastrous for the climate, the climate change negotiations might just escape relatively unscathed.
Conclusion

In the wake of Donald Trump’s Executive Order that effectively dismantled U.S. domestic climate policy, the future seems bleak for climate action. Whilst some glimmers of hope remain in the form of state- and local-level entities as well as other countries on the international stage, keeping pressure on the United States to live up to its commitments and responsibilities will continue to be a vital (although admittedly more difficult) task. Internationally, we can rally to support people fighting against the new administration and for climate action in the United States. But perhaps more importantly, the fact that the United States is entering another phase of climate obstructionism cannot be allowed to derail global efforts, because ignoring climate change and its adverse effects is not a luxury that we can afford.
Endnotes

1 | Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) is the action a national government intends to take under the Paris Agreement agreed in December 2015 as the basis of post-2020 global emissions reduction commitments and other climate policies. After the agreement came into force, INDC’s were named NDC (Nationally Determined Contribution) for those countries that ratified the Paris Agreement. See Climate Policy Observer, “INDC,” accessed on April 12, 2017, http://climateobserver.org/open-and-shut/indc/.


3 | Ibid.


6 | Ibid.


8 | Ibid.


10 | Ibid.


12 | Ibid.

13 | Ibid.


22 | Personal observation by the authors in COP 22, November 7-18, 2016, Marrakech, Morocco.


