

US CLIMATE ACTION AFTER WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PARIS AGREEMENT: MENDING THE BREACH

By Alice Loyd

The world was dismayed when, on June 1, 2017, Donald Trump announced he would pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. European dignitaries, US politicians, and executives of leading American companies—Facebook, Google, Apple, Unilever, for example—had sent last-minute appeals asking him not to do this ([businessinsider.com](https://www.businessinsider.com)), and after the announcement, his action was condemned by leaders of every major nation ([cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com)). The United States cannot, however, officially announce its plan to withdraw from the agreement until November 4, 2019. At that time the president can send a letter to the United Nations secretary general notifying the organization of the nation's intent to leave. There is a one-year waiting period before that withdrawal takes effect, which means the earliest a nation can officially exit the Paris accord is November 4, 2020—one day after a new US president is sworn into office. If the US is out of the agreement on inauguration day 2021, the new president could immediately notify the United Nations of its intention to reenter. And after a 30-day period, the United States would be back in the Agreement ([nrdc.org](https://www.nrdc.org)).

But the announcement brought immediate consequences: (1) US contributions to the Green Climate Fund ended, impacting the ability of developing countries to mitigate and adapt; (2) US climate research funding ceased, threatening the quality of future IPCC reports and the authority of future climate negotiations; and (3) other countries received a greater share of the reduction burden if the world is to hold the temperature to a 2C rise, the target set in the Agreement ([sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com)). Furthermore, from the moment of that decision until now, the Trump administration has set about to thwart any effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Almost at once there arose actions from within the United States to counter the Trump position. A coalition of mayors, governors, academics, and business people led by former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged not only to uphold the Paris Agreement in spite of Trump's withdrawal, but to actively work with the UN to supply data and abide by their rules. The coalition pledged to provide \$15 million to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which administers the agreement—the amount the United States likely would have been expected to contribute ([fortune.com](https://www.fortune.com)). Under the name "Climate Leadership Council," a group of highly respected conservative leaders proposed a carbon tax. Membership includes such notables as James A. Baker III, Treasury secretary for President Ronald Reagan and secretary of state for President George H. W. Bush; Henry M. Paulson Jr., Treasury secretary for President George W. Bush; George P. Shultz, Treasury secretary for President Richard Nixon and secretary of state for Mr. Reagan; and Rob Walton, who had recently completed 23 years as chairman of Walmart ([nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)). And a group of 100 US business and political leaders under the "We Are Still In" banner set up a large pavilion in November 2017 at the Second Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Paris Agreement, COP23 in Bonn. The group declared their coalition of cities, states and businesses represented over half the US

economy, and would meet the Paris goals without federal government leadership (carbonbrief.org).

Since then there has been steady movement opposing the direction of federal climate policy. A brief survey of recent actions in 2018 includes the following:

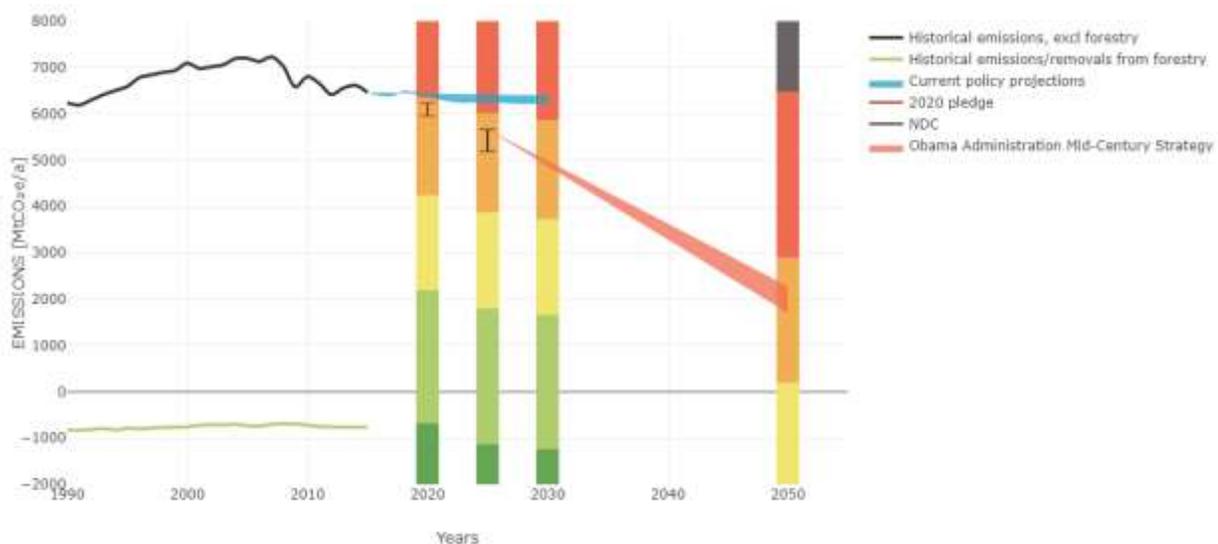
- On May 1 a coalition of 17 states and the District of Columbia, opposing an attempt by the Trump administration to weaken emissions requirements for cars and light trucks through model year 2025, sued the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (insideclimatenews.org). (See update on August 2, below.)
- On June 19 Colorado became the 13th state, along with the District of Columbia, to begin the process of adopting California's stringent vehicle emissions standards. On that day Governor John Hickenlooper directed the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission to draft rules to adopt the same standards as California by the end of the year (cnet.com). California standards, put in place in 1966 by the state under leadership of then-Governor Ronald Reagan, were the nation's first attempt to control auto emissions. In 1967 the US Congress granted California special status, saying the state could request a "waiver" to require stricter tailpipe standards if it provided a compelling reason such regulations were needed. In 1977 Congress said other states could adopt California's stricter standards. Many of the measures pioneered in California, such as catalytic converters, nitrous oxide regulations, and "check engine" systems, have become standard across the country (washingtonpost.com).
- June 19 is also the date industry launched a major campaign to enact market-based climate solutions. Americans for Carbon Dividends, which counts former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) and former Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen as members, intends to grow political support in Congress for the [Baker-Shultz Carbon Dividends plan](#), first proposed in 2017 by the Climate Leadership Council (see paragraph 3 of this article). Under this plan there would be a gradually increasing carbon tax with the proceeds dividended to all Americans and a roll-back of regulations. The campaign has deep financial backing from Exelon (which has pledged one million dollars to the effort), FirstSolar, and other energy companies and industry sector leaders; support from fossil fuel companies, including ExxonMobil, Shell, and BP; and lobbying and fundraising help from long-time GOP operatives (bloomberg.com).
- On June 20, 34 executives from the heating, ventilation, air-conditioning and refrigeration industries sent a letter to President Trump urging him to submit a an amendment to the [1987 Montreal Protocol](#) to the US Senate for ratification. The protocol was passed to protect the ozone layer and the amendment would strengthen the protocol by phasing out hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). They didn't mention "climate change" or "emissions" but said the treaty would increase American exports by \$5 billion and lead to 33,000 new manufacturing jobs. On that basis the initiative is reported to be gaining Republican support among lawmakers. It offers an unusual opportunity in the Republican-controlled Congress to strengthen environmental regulation. (nytimes.com).

- On July 2 Rhode Island filed a lawsuit against 21 fossil fuel companies demanding damages associated with sea level rise and water cycles. Attorney General Peter Kilmartin said the companies are knowingly contributing to climate change and the “catastrophic consequences” to the state, its residents and the ecosystem, and have failed to adequately warn customers, consumers and regulators of the known risks of their products (apnews.com).
- On July 16, when the Pentagon removed references to national security risks posed by climate change, 40 House members sent a letter to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis expressing their concerns: “While we appreciate the need to update reports when it is appropriate and necessary, we are disturbed that the revisions may have intentionally targeted mentions of climate change. The facts are clear: climate change poses a threat to the Department and the nation.” Eight of the 40 signers on the letter were Republicans (walters.house.gov).
- July 19 was Youth Climate Lobby Day and July 21 the Zero Hour March as part of the youth-led movement to pressure governments to move faster on climate change. In Washington, DC, and in many other cities young people rallied around a platform that includes slashing greenhouse gas emissions, investing in mass transit, transitioning from fossil fuels, and fining polluters, and also racial justice, workers’ rights, and financial support for helping poor communities adapt to a warming world (grist.org).
- As of July 23 the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus in the US House had grown to 86 members. Membership is gained in pairs, one from each party. So of the 86 members, there are 43 Democrats matched with 43 Republicans. The caucus is committed to educating members on economically-viable options to reduce climate risk and protect the nation’s economy, security, infrastructure, agriculture, water supply, and public safety. (citizensclimatelobby.org).
- On July 23 Representative Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) introduced a bill to put a price on carbon, the first GOP-led carbon pricing legislation proposed in over a decade. Curbelo said he hoped the legislation would at the very least renew a US debate on climate change. The bill is co-sponsored by Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, the Republican with highest environmental voting percentage in 2017 according to the League of Conservation Voters’ scorecard (ecowatch.org).
- On July 25 several large oil and gas companies signed onto a letter praising the Curbelo carbon tax legislation. Royal Dutch Shell, BP, and Equinor, along with a few other big oil-and-gas producers, have long said they support a tax on carbon emissions, and although they don’t explicitly endorse the bill, their support is sure to bring about more active lobbying (axios.com).
- On July 31 the US Supreme Court, rejecting an attempt from the Trump administration to dismiss, allowed the suit by the 21 young people to proceed against the federal government for not acting on climate change. In a brief unsigned ruling the High Court wrote that the administration’s request is “premature,” but said that the scope of the claims from young people in the Juliana vs. US suit is “striking” and “the justiciability of claims presents substantial grounds for difference of opinion.” The Supreme Court directed the lower court where the case is pending to consider these facts. The decision

marks the third time courts have denied administration attempts to halt the lawsuit (thehill.com).¹

- On August 2, in response to the Trump administration's release of its long-anticipated proposal to freeze auto emissions reduction targets to 2020 levels and to force states to follow federal guidelines, attorneys general from Massachusetts and 18 other states plus Washington, DC, released a statement announcing they would challenge the administration. They said the policy change would increase carbon emissions at a level equivalent to adding 400 million cars to the road, and cost US residents between \$193 billion and \$236 billion more on gas through 2035 (greentechmedia.com). The group includes all states that use California's more-restrictive standards over the federal rules.

We support these kinds of actions and hope for more, but in the end, success will be measured by the extent to which we gain control of US greenhouse gas emissions. In or out of the Paris Agreement, emissions are what matters regarding the climate. The year following Mr. Trump's announcement found the measurements about the same as they were the year before, and a slight decrease is expected to occur through the early 2020s (climateactiontracker.org).



A slight decrease is not enough, of course, the fact being that even if all nations including the United States fully met the pledges made in Paris in April 2016, the goal of keeping temperature rise to 2C or lower would not be met. The UN Environment Program (UNEP) found that even if every country that made an emissions-cutting pledge in the Paris Agreement kept its promise, the world will still fall 12 to 14 gigatons short each year of keeping the temperature rise below

¹ The case at issue here is a federal case known as *Juliana v. US*, The nonprofit organization "[Our Children's Trust](http://OurChildrensTrust.org)" has supported this case and nine state level cases. The federal case and eight of nine similar state level cases remain alive. One of the state cases, the one brought in the state of Washington, was dismissed on August 14, 2018. In dismissing the case "King County Superior Court Judge Michael Scott wrote that the issues at the heart of the case are political and should be considered by the state's legislative and executive branches, not settled by the courts." (insideclimatenews.org).

2 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels. The individual commitments would only keep warming below 3 degrees Celsius at best (scientificamerican.org). Scientists say, too, that a 2C rise is dangerously high (iflscience.com).

Considering those conclusions and with the current administration committed to fossil fuels, what does the future hold? The answer is certainly things will be worse than they would be if the administration committed to carbon reduction. But globally we may not yet entirely be past the point of remedy. As journalist Jeff Tollefson summarized recently in the journal Nature in an article well worth careful attention:

Little time remains for the world to get its emissions under control. The Paris agreement is predicated on a single global carbon budget that countries are collectively using up each year. The longer humanity waits to reduce emissions, the more aggressive future measures will need to be to keep the total under budget. It is difficult to say exactly how much time is left. Estimates for the maximum amount of carbon that can be emitted if warming is to remain below 1.5 °C, for example, vary widely. There could be 10 or even 15 years of leeway remaining. Or, humanity might have already burned through the total allotment six years ago.

Energy journalist David Roberts, writing an important analysis in Vox in May 2018, voiced a similar understanding: “In a nutshell, hitting Paris targets will mean *both* that developed nations start rapidly reducing toward net-zero emissions by mid-century *and* that developing nations find a different path to prosperity than the one traveled by the countries around them holding all the wealth and still, on a per-capita basis, emitting the most carbon. It’s a long shot.”

It’s a long shot but one that is necessary to attempt, Paris or not, Trump and company notwithstanding. Each item in the list (above) of positive climate actions of mid-2018 is an example of what every individual, institution, and public agency with the power to do so must undertake without delay. If the curve of greenhouse gas emissions is to go down far enough fast enough, each of us will have a role to play. The hypothetical question “What is the worst thing that can happen to the world on our watch?” can now be answered. We are already seeing the front edge of what catastrophic climate change looks like. From several directions we are also being shown what we can do to avoid such change. We have choices regarding our own personal carbon budget (measure your carbon footprint), and we can choose how strongly we apply weight with elected officials at every level.

One thing is certain: action that reduces the rate and degree of global warming is a good investment of our strength, money, and time. The gain is sure to be worth the cost.

To receive encouraging news about climate events, consider signing up for Citizens Climate Lobby emails.