

2016

19/07/2017

The Paris Agreement - is New Zealand

(Kirk, S., 2017)

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The Paris Agreement - is New Zealand as committed without the US?

Stacey Kirk
June 2, 2017

President Donald Trump says he will withdraw the United States from the landmark 2015 global agreement to fight climate change.

REUTERS

Now that Donald Trump has pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement, you might be reasonably alarmed it could collapse faster than the TPP. Relax, it's not quite that serious.

Or rather, climate change is incredibly serious but it appears the world's commitment to tackling it remains serious - with or without the US. That goes for New Zealand's involvement in the agreement as well.

US President Donald Trump is weighing his options over the Paris climate deal.

JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

While the quality of our plan to contribute to reducing emissions under the Paris Agreement is subject to considerable debate, the Government has confirmed an agreement without the US is still a worthwhile pursuit, but does that mean the remaining countries have to make up the shortfall?

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Here's the state of play, where New Zealand is concerned, on the Paris Agreement.

Climate Change Issues minister Paula Bennett says New Zealand will remain dedicated to the Paris Agreement, with or without US involvement.

MONIQUE FORD / Fairfax NZ

What is the Paris Agreement?

The agreement commits the countries that signed it, to limit global warming "well below" 2 degrees Celsius, and if possible below 1.5C, until 2100.

Immediately, the target is to limit global warming to a 2 degrees Celsius increase by 2030. On top of the 2C target, they have promised to raise \$100 billion a year by 2020 to help poor countries adapt their economies, and accepted a new goal of net zero emissions by "later this century".

The United Nations is calling on all countries to step up their efforts to curb climate change.

It is not a binding agreement, and calls on countries to make voluntary contributions to reach the collective target, as well as periodic reporting to record progress.

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However the agreement is considered historic for the level of international buy-in, recognising that climate change is a real global threat that cannot be ignored.

Who signed it?

3rd



Metiria Turei says the current government is weak on climate change and much more can be done.

The agreement is historic and was signed by 196 countries - including New Zealand and the US - in Paris in late 2015. As of May, 147 countries - again, including New Zealand - have ratified it.

It's now in force, because there are enough countries to make up 55 per cent of the world's emissions

Why is the US pulling out?

News that the United States is withdrawing won't necessarily surprise any other Governments. However they might have hoped that Trump's campaign pledge would become a broken political promise.

Trump has always maintained that he would "cancel" the Paris Climate Agreement. He has previously said climate change was a "hoax" created by the Chinese.

Incidentally, the US withdrawal would put them in a very small group, alongside Syria and Nicaragua.

That's what happened with the TPP, look where it left that agreement. Where does it leave New Zealand?

Well, the Paris Climate Agreement is not so dependent on the US as the TPP was. In fact, it's actually not dependent on the US at all.

The departure of the US is a significant blow: if the world is fighting against climate change, then the absence of the US will have to be made up for.

Minister for Climate Change Issues Paula Bennett says: "It would be disappointing if the US chose to withdraw from the Paris Agreement".

But just because the federal Government pulls out of the agreement, does not mean individual states can't remain working towards its goals. New York is just one state that has already indicated it would remain dedicated to the accord.

So we're still in?

Absolutely, says Bennett.

"New Zealand is committed to playing its part in the global climate change response. We have an ambitious work programme underway to implement our own commitments under the Paris Agreement.

"The clear message from around the world is the global community intends to press ahead with the Paris agenda. Most recently, leaders of the G7 reaffirmed their strong commitment to swiftly implementing the Paris Agreement," Bennett says.

What do we have to do under it?

Well, that's open for debate - not least because the agreement does not specify exactly how countries have to reach their target. However, all countries are called upon to set their own targets and then formally submit those to the UN.

New Zealand has done that and the Government's target is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030.

This target is equivalent to 11 per cent below 1990 levels by 2030. The Government intends to meet the target through a mix of domestic emission reductions, the removal of carbon dioxide by forests and participation in international carbon markets.

It's the level of reliance on this last point however, that is cause for political debate.

Now the US is gone, will their contributions have to be balanced out by other countries?

It could do, but Bennett says it's tough to make any assumptions just yet.

What will it cost to meet our targets?

Recent official information has put the cost of meeting the commitments under the emissions trading scheme near \$14b over 10 years. That would be without addressing New Zealand's own emissions, but that should be taken as advice rather than a hard-and-fast bill at this point.

In the Budget, Finance Minister Steven Joyce unveiled a total of \$4m dedicated to climate change - and was roundly criticised for the "pittance" amount.

But he says that is dedicated to policy work to developing a full plan, and it was "difficult to say" how much taxpayers would have to spend on international carbon credits - effectively a payment to have other countries do the work for us.

He says the "intensity of carbon emissions is dropping" and the cost of offsetting emissions from 2021 to 2030 would be accounted for in future budgets.

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Failing to act could have disastrous and lasting effects for the whole world.

The United Nations has labelled climate change as one of the greatest threats the world is facing, and people were already experiencing its impacts, including changing weather patterns, rising sea level, and more extreme weather events.

"Without action, the world's average surface temperature is projected to rise over the 21st century and is likely to surpass 3 degrees celsius this century - with some areas of the world expected to warm even more.

"The poorest and most vulnerable people will be affected the most."

Global emissions of carbon dioxide had increased by almost 50 per cent since 1990, and the impacts of climate change would persist for many centuries even if emissions were stopped.

- *Audio courtesy of RNZ*

- Stuff

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