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Latest climate talks actually made progress despite US obstinacy



Anthony Kwana/Getty Images

By Michael Le Page

The latest meeting to discuss international action on climate change has made modest progress. It did so despite the US stating earlier this year that [it plans to withdraw from the Paris agreement](#).

“It showed that the rest of the world is steadfast in its support for the Paris agreement, despite the backwards steps being taken by the federal government in the United States,” said [Nicholas Stern](#) of the London School of Economics.

At the meeting in Bonn, Germany, last week, over 20 governments called for a rapid phase-out of coal. The “[Powering Past Coal Alliance](#)” was led by the UK and Canada, which have unilaterally decided to phase out coal by 2025 and 2030 respectively. However, the other countries have not committed to a specific date.

Coal is one of the dirtiest fuels, both in terms of carbon dioxide and other pollutants, so phasing it out quickly would make a huge difference.

Getting rid of coal

[Global emissions of carbon dioxide from coal are already falling](#), because it is being outcompeted by other energy sources and because China is trying to cut air pollution. However, many countries – including Germany – still rely heavily on coal. Globally, [around 1600 new coal plants are still planned or being built](#).

At the only official event held by the US delegation in Bonn, officials and business leaders called for “cleaner fossil fuels”. The event was disrupted by protestors, and the attempt to promote “[clean coal](#)” was widely condemned.

“[Promoting coal at a climate summit is like promoting tobacco at a cancer summit](#),” said New York mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Donald Trump has pledged to revive coal’s fortunes in the US, but he is unlikely to deliver. Not only is coal facing tough competition from gas and renewables, but [many US states and cities remain committed to climate action](#).

That point was emphasised in Bonn by California governor [Jerry Brown](#), who has criticised Trump’s climate stance.

But at Brown’s talk, there were protests about his failure to curb oil drilling in California. “I wish we could have no pollution, but we have to have our automobiles,” said Brown.

Where’s the money?

During the meeting, [Syria announced that it would sign up to the Paris agreement](#). That means every country in the world has now signed up, as technically the US can’t withdraw until after the next US election in 2020.

However, the US is not the only rich country failing to meet its previous commitments. In Paris in 2015, rich countries promised to provide \$100 billion a year in loans and grants to developing countries to help them grow cleanly. In Bonn, they didn’t even want to talk about their failure to deliver.

Nor was any progress made on the highly charged issue of rich countries, which are responsible for most greenhouse emissions, compensating poorer countries for the losses they are already suffering as a result.

The Bonn talks were [the 23rd annual meeting](#) of the countries that signed up to climate action at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The point of the meeting was to continue negotiations on how to implement the Paris agreement and the various other deals made over the years.