

Climate change: COP24 fails to adopt key scientific report

By Matt McGrath
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4 hours ago



Attempts to incorporate a key scientific study into global climate talks in Poland have failed.

The IPCC report on the impacts of a temperature rise of 1.5C, had a significant impact when it was launched last October. Scientists and many delegates in Poland were shocked and disappointed as the US, Saudi Arabia and Russia objected to this meeting "welcoming" the report.

It was the 2015 climate conference that had commissioned the landmark study.

The report said that the world is now completely off track, heading more towards 3C this century rather than 1.5C. Keeping to the preferred target would need "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society". If warming was to be kept to 1.5C this century, then emissions of carbon dioxide would have to be reduced by 45% by 2030. The report, launched in Incheon in South Korea, had an immediate impact winning praise from politicians all over the world.



Climate protestors marching in Katowice outside COP24

But negotiators here ran into serious trouble when Saudi Arabia, the US and Russia objected to the conference "welcoming" the document. Instead they wanted to support a much more lukewarm phrase, that the conference would "take note" of the report. Saudi Arabia had fought until the last minute in Korea to limit the conclusions of the document. Eventually they gave in. But it now seems that they have brought their objections to Poland.

The dispute dragged on as huddles of negotiators met in corners of the plenary session here, trying to agree a compromise wording.

None was forthcoming.

With no consensus, under UN rules the passage of text had to be dropped.

Many countries expressed frustration and disappointment at the outcome.

"It's not about one word or another, it is us being in a position to welcome a report we commissioned in the first place," said Ruenna Haynes from St Kitts and Nevis.

"If there is anything ludicrous about the discussion its that we can't welcome the report," she said to spontaneous applause.

Scientists and campaigners were also extremely disappointed by the outcome.

"We are really angry and find it atrocious that some countries dismiss the messages and the consequences that we are facing, by not accepting what is unequivocal and not acting upon it," said Yamide Dagnet from the World Resources Institute, and a former climate negotiator for the UK.

Others noted that Saudi Arabia and the US had supported the report when it was launched in October. It appears that the Saudis and the US balked at the political implications of the UN body putting the IPCC report at its heart.

"Climate science is not a political football," said Camilla Born, from climate think tank E3G.

"All the worlds governments - Saudi included - agreed the 1.5C report and we deserve the truth. Saudi can't argue with physics, the climate will keep on changing."

Many delegates are now hoping that ministers, who arrive on Monday, will try and revive efforts to put this key report at the heart of the conference.

"We hope that the rest of the world will rally and we get a decisive response to the report," said Yamide Dagnet.

"I sincerely hope that all countries will fight that we don't leave COP24 having missed a moment of history."

Trump administration resists global climate efforts at home and overseas

In November, President Trump tours the area in California that was devastated by the Camp Fire. With him are Gov.-elect Gavin Newsom, left, and Gov. Jerry Brown.

By [David Nakamura](#) and [Darryl Fears](#)

December 9 at 7:31 PM

The United States joined a controversial proposal by Saudi Arabia and Russia this weekend to weaken a reference to a key report on the severity of global warming, sharpening battle lines at the [global climate summit in Poland](#) aimed at gaining consensus over how to combat rising temperatures.

Arguments erupted Saturday night before a United Nations working group focused on science and technology, where the United States teamed with Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to challenge language that would have welcomed the findings of the landmark report, which said that the world has barely 10 years to cut carbon emissions by nearly half to avoid catastrophic warming.

“There was going to be an agreement to welcome the . . . report,” said Jake Schmidt, the managing director of the Natural Resources Defense Council’s international program, who is in Poland. “The U.S. wanted to ‘note’ it, which is saying in essence that we know it’s out there but we have no comment.”

The U.S. position lines up with the views of the Trump administration, which is plowing ahead with a raft of aggressive policies on coal power and oil exploration that are likely to worsen the effects of climate change — steamrolling over dire environmental warnings issued by the administration’s own team of experts in a major report just two weeks ago.

“The United States was willing to note the report and express appreciation to the scientists who developed it, but not to welcome it, as that would denote endorsement of the report,” a State Department spokesman said. “As we have made clear in the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] and other bodies, the United States has not endorsed the findings of the report.”

In 2015, as countries of the world negotiated the Paris climate agreement, they [asked](#) the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to produce a report in 2018 “on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways.”

It’s this report, integral to the negotiations in Katowice, Poland, and specifically timed for them, that has now become a flash point at the talks. Delegates from other nations were surprised when the United States rejected a move to welcome the report and proposed only to “note” it.

“The fact that nations are spending this much time on minor wording issues while the science finds increasing risk of catastrophe has to be seen as a metaphor for how inadequate the global response to the climate challenge has been,” said Paul Bledsoe, a former Clinton climate adviser who is in Poland. “It also shows that the lack of U.S. leadership has massive costs to global ambition.”

The attempt by Trump administration delegates to look past the world’s most important climate reports comes two weeks after the administration downplayed a [landmark federal report](#) about the

impacts of global warming on the United States, which is the world's second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide.

Over the weekend, the president reaffirmed his decision to remove the United States from the global Paris agreement to reduce carbon emissions from coal, natural gas and petroleum. Referring to continued unrest in France, where thousands of demonstrators have protested a proposed fuel-tax increase, Trump tweeted: "Very sad day & night in Paris. Maybe it's time to end the ridiculous and expensive Paris Agreement and return money back to the people in the form of lower taxes?"

David Attenborough: Under Trump, U.S. is 'out on a limb' on climate On the sidelines of United Nations climate talks in Poland, British naturalist David Attenborough said he hopes to see changes in U.S. policy on climate change. (Reuters)

Trump touted American progress on the issue. "The U.S. was way ahead of the curve on that and the only major country where emissions went down last year!"

It is true that U.S. emissions dropped in 2017, but in 2018 they are projected to grow 2.5 percent.

According to the federal Energy Information Administration, emissions had fallen in seven of the last 10 years before this year's rise.

Ignoring the climate assessment of experts within their own administration, released the day after Thanksgiving, U.S. officials in recent days cleared a path to build more highly polluting coal-fired power plants, authorized seismic studies in the Atlantic Ocean that could harm marine animals, and opened millions of acres of land in the West to mining and fracking, stripping protections for a near-threatened species of bird.

White House officials said that the rollback of Obama-era regulations had been in the works for months and that the timing of the announcements just days after the Nov. 23 release of the National Climate Assessment was coincidental. But experts said the Trump administration has clearly accelerated its energy agenda this year as the president seeks to lock in the rule changes, which can take months to finalize, before the end of his first term.

Republican administrations have traditionally been more lenient than Democrats on environmental regulations, but Trump has overseen a shift that is "much, much bigger," said Bruce Buckheit, who served in the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement division.

"They want to get stuff done that can't be undone by the next administration," Buckheit said. "This is their moment to keep on truckin'."

For Trump, the moves reinforce his belief that climate warnings — delivered with increasing urgency by scientists who say policymakers are running out of time to avoid calamities caused by rising temperatures — are fanning false hysteria about the planet's future.

Rather than moderate his views, the president has made clear that he and his advisers are "not necessarily such believers," as he put it in [a recent interview](#) with The Washington Post.

The National Climate Assessment, mandated by Congress, warned that temperatures could rise by as much as 2.3 degrees Fahrenheit in the continental United States by 2050, unleashing destructive

and costly heat waves and extreme weather events.

“I don’t see it,” Trump told The Post.

That message has been delivered beyond America’s shores. At the Group of 20 summit in Argentina in late November, all nations except the United States [endorsed a joint statement](#) that reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris climate accord. Trump officials signed the document only after securing the insertion of language highlighting the administration’s decision to exit the Paris compact and America’s right to use all forms of energy.

In Poland on Monday, the administration has arranged to put on a show promoting coal and other fossil fuels. When a panel of climate skeptics at talks in Germany last year defended the administration’s policies and Trump’s assertion that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese, a large group of activists sang, jeered and walked out.

White House aides rejected the notion that the regulatory changes are in conflict with the climate report, which they dismissed as focusing on the most extreme scenarios. Press secretary Sarah Sanders told reporters that such modeling contradicts “long-established trends” and called the process “an extremely complicated science that is never exact.”

Jeffrey Holmstead, who served as an EPA assistant administrator in the George W. Bush administration, said the Trump White House has been clear that the report “overstates or exaggerates the risk of climate change.”

The administration is moving to reverse Obama administration actions that Trump and his aides believe overstepped the government’s authority, Holmstead said. For example, Trump is replacing Obama’s Clean Power Plan with an alternative proposal to grant states more autonomy to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

“They think that the people who issued that report may be scientists but that maybe they have their own agenda,” said Holmstead, a lawyer and lobbyist at Bracewell who represents energy companies.

That view does not square with public opinion. A [Politico/Morning Consult poll](#) released Friday showed that two-thirds of voters are very or somewhat concerned about the report’s findings, with 58 percent saying they agree with the conclusion that human activity is accelerating climate change.

During [a tour last month](#) of the devastation caused by deadly wildfires in Paradise, Calif., Trump was asked by reporters whether his skepticism of climate change had changed.

“No, I have a strong opinion,” the president replied. “I want great climate; we’re going to have that.”

The climate assessment also contradicts the president’s core assertion that regulations aimed at lowering greenhouse gas pollution harm the economy.

On the contrary, the report says, respiratory illnesses from pollution that lead to sick days for workers and heat-related deaths could stunt economic growth. And the flooding of roads, which block transportation routes and close businesses, could cost the economy billions of dollars per year.

Ignoring such warnings, the administration [moved this week to lift restrictions](#) to protect sage

grouse habitat on 9 million acres on Western land to promote oil exploration and natural gas drilling, widely called fracking, as well as other mineral mining. Drilling for natural gas has created a boom in energy that powers and heats homes, but burning it creates more greenhouse gases.

According to the Energy Information Administration, petroleum use accounts for the largest amount of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States — 46 percent. Natural gas consumption, at 29 percent, edged out coal, at 26 percent, [the Energy Information Administration said](#).

On Thursday, the Trump administration announced its plan to reverse an Obama administration rule requiring coal-fired power plants to install technology that captures and lowers their carbon emissions.

Acting EPA administrator Andrew Wheeler, who lobbied for a major coal company and other energy interests before joining the administration this year, said the technology's cost made new coal plants infeasible. In fact, coal plants are in steep decline, with the amount of coal used in energy generation falling by 53 percent since 2006 as natural gas use increased by 33 percent, according to information from the administration.

Republicans in regions that are producers or heavy users of coal applauded Trump.

“For eight years, President Obama landed blow after blow in his war on coal,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said Thursday. “Now President Trump’s EPA is also targeting another regulation that would have made it nearly impossible to build any new plants in the future. This is a crucial step toward undoing the damage and putting coal back on a level playing field.”

Buckheit, the former EPA official, said it's unlikely that any new coal plants will open. Rather, he said, the administration's action was “in many ways symbolic. This is playing to the base.”

That political messaging has put Trump aides in the awkward position of trying to explain the apparent dichotomy of his regulatory agenda with the conclusions of the climate assessment. In [an interview](#) with a Canadian television network, U.S. Ambassador Kelly Craft drew public ridicule when she said she respects “both sides of the science” on climate change.

“I believe there are scientists on both sides that are accurate,” she said.

Supporters said the administration was being unfairly criticized by activists who fail to accept that it's unrealistic to assume the world can quickly transition to renewable energy sources.

“I understand the Trump administration is not popular in those settings,” Holmstead said of global climate conferences. “But I do think they have an important point. The only practical way in many parts of the world to have electricity or freedom of transportation is to burn a fossil fuel. To simply try to say you cannot talk about fossil fuels anymore is whistling past the graveyard.”