

The Delray Democrat

The Paris Agreement¹

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A Trump supporter told me that the Paris Agreement was a crappy deal, partly because China wasn't in it. Of course, China is in the Paris Agreement, but it's necessary to explain the different interests in the Paris Agreement, particularly financial, and how those interests need to be met.

By way of review, greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide (CO₂) and nitrogen, trap heat produced by the sun much as a greenhouse stays warm by trapping the sun's heat. Natural cycles produce eras of ice ages and warm periods, but since the Industrial Age began 150 years ago, the Earth has warmed at a rate that would normally take tens of thousands to millions of years.

This isn't necessarily bad for the planet, which will continue to exist, but it's very bad for living things because we now have almost 8 billion people on the Earth. If we do nothing or not enough, the increasing heat will cause oceans to flood coastal cities and countries, climate shifts will alter crop growing seasons and regions, ocean acidification will wreak havoc in the food chain, and increased energy in the atmosphere and oceans will mean massive storms, droughts, floods, and fires. The shifting of animal ecosystems will push species closer to extinction as well as closer together, resulting in increasing pandemics.

There are two components to slowing and reversing climate change: reducing the production of greenhouse gases and creating sinks to absorb those gases and keep them out of the atmosphere. Capturing CO₂ by bioenergy with carbon capture (BECCS) and Direct Air Capture (DAC) are promising technologies but face huge hurdles, such as tremendous energy and land use requirements before large scale implementation can be considered. The best way to keep CO₂ out of the atmosphere is the way nature did it, forests, but we keep tearing them down.

In order to stop climate change, we have to stop producing greenhouse gases, and quickly. That means not burning coal, oil, and gas, which are the major causes of climate change. We can use solar, wind, geothermal, and other renewable sources of energy, as well as biofuels, which make use of plants that naturally absorb CO₂. There's also nuclear power, but it is far from a clean fuel and it is unclear if it can ever be used safely. How that can all be done is, of course, part of what we need to develop.

We must note that climate change began with the first countries to industrialize: England, America, France, Germany, and so on. When these countries were industrializing, there were no regulations of any kind. The cheapest and most polluting forms of coal were used in abundance, oil was burned without the slightest thought to environmental destruction, cars had no pollution controls, and industry made huge profits while dumping the cleanup costs onto the public.

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, October 2020, p. 6

I doubt anyone had any idea of the long term damage that was being done to the climate, but plenty of other environmental destruction took place that was clearly visible, including smog and contaminated air and water. Awareness of the problems grew, but as usual, profits remained private while cleanup costs were paid by the public. Still, ever so slowly, regulations began to reign in the worst of the abuses to our planet in the industrializing countries.

For sixty years, big oil interests knew about the danger of burning fossil fuels but kept doing everything they could to deny and obstruct this information.

So, the basis of the Paris Agreement is getting all nations to do their part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and perhaps absorbing them from the atmosphere. Unlike the Kyoto accord, there are no binding penalties in the Paris Agreement, which grew out of Kyoto but is not part of it. The goal of the Paris Agreement is to hold warming to under 3.6 °F, which is the minimum necessary to avoid massive climate change.

Each of the 189 signatories agreed to regularly report actions taken although there are no specific targets by specific dates. President Trump gave notice that America will withdraw from the agreement, an act that will ironically become effective just after the November election.

Financial obligations are determined by each country, and they may pool their contributions. There are no enforcement mechanisms; there is only a “name and shame” hope that countries will understand the consequences of inaction. Clearly, developed nations owe much more towards saving our planet than those currently developing. For instance, it isn’t fair to Brazil to tell them that they can’t cut down the rainforest when we’ve cut down an entire continent of forests. That said, we must financially help them to avoid having to cut down the rainforest, an action that will doom our planet. It isn’t fair to tell China they can’t burn coal when we did the same thing. We must offer them technology that will allow them to develop as we did, but without the crippling effects.

The Paris Agreement is the minimum that needs to be done. There is no alternative except burying our heads in the sand and wishing away the coming catastrophe(s). If we fail, the generations that inherit a blighted planet will never forgive us.