

Trumping the Environment

A climate change denier in the White House is bad news for the world.

With so much of the focus on United States (us) President Donald Trump's 27 January "Muslim ban," the 90/120-day ban on citizens from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering the us, his executive orders affecting environmental regulations have slipped under the radar. Just as the visa ban is having repercussions around the world, so too will some of his actions with regard to the environment. Of special concern are his current actions, and anticipated future ones, that will affect us greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Given the levels of GHGs that the us continues to spew, any increase, or even the status quo, spells disaster for efforts to contain processes of climate change and global warming.

Trump's disdain for environmentalists was known even during his campaign. So his choice of advisors, including Myron Ebell who is heading the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the transition team until Scott Pruitt, the nominee for director of the agency is confirmed, is not surprising. Ebell, a director in the ultra-conservative Competitive Enterprise Institute, is on record describing the environmental movement as "the greatest threat to freedom and prosperity in the modern world." Pruitt is a climate change denier who, as attorney general of the state of Oklahoma, filed as many as 14 lawsuits against the EPA on behalf of oil companies. That these are the men who are tasked to protect the environment is an ominous indication of what we can expect.

Within days of being sworn in, Trump announced a freeze on funds to the EPA (he had actually suggested it be disbanded during his campaign) and called for a drastic reduction in its staff of 15,000 engineers and scientists. He also placed a virtual gag order on the EPA staff saying they could not communicate or discuss research findings with anyone, including the press. What this means is that the latest data on GHG emissions, for instance, will not be available in the public realm. It is also not surprising that the White House Climate Change page has now been replaced by "An America First Energy Plan" page in which there is no mention of climate change. This energy plan, according to Trump, envisages clearing "an estimated \$50 trillion in untapped shale, oil and natural gas reserves, especially on federal lands." In other words, the Trump administration is setting aside, as quickly as it can, what had begun to be put in place by the previous administration as part of the Climate

Action Plan and the Clean Power Plan and is paving the way for the fossil fuel lobby to operate without too many restrictions, all in the name of making America great again and providing jobs to Americans.

The consequences of this will be serious not just for the us but also for the rest of the world. The us did not sign on to the legally-binding Kyoto Protocol, the first international climate treaty that sought to put curbs on GHG emissions by the industrialised countries held responsible for the global accumulation of these gases. However in 2015, under the Obama administration, it did come on board for the Paris Treaty that allowed every country to set its own Intended Nationally Determined Commitments (INDC) to reduce GHG emissions. The us committed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to 30% lower than 2005 levels by 2030 and has apparently already reached 27% of this target. But it has not made significant progress on other GHGs, including from transportation systems that account for 26% of emissions, or agriculture accounting for 9% of emissions.

Even if the us does not pull out of the Paris Treaty, as Trump threatened it would during his election campaign, it could slide back on its commitments. According to the World Resources Institute, even if all the signatories of the Paris Treaty fulfil their pledges to reduce GHG emissions, the possibility of meeting the goal of capping global temperature rise to 2° Celsius is difficult. Given this, if one of the world's largest economies decides that it need not bother about these commitments, the repercussions would be grave.

As serious as the possibility that the Trump administration will actively dilute its commitment to the climate change treaty is the issue of funding. In Paris, the us had committed to contribute \$3 billion by 2020 towards the \$100 billion United Nations Green Climate Fund to help poor countries adapt to climate change and adopt cleaner energy. So far it has only given \$500 million, partly due to resistance from the Republican-dominated Congress. It is more than likely, given the Trump administration's attitude towards climate change, that the us will not fulfil this commitment.

It is clear already that a climate change denier sitting in the White House is bad news for the world in more respects than one. First, the Trump administration will encourage greater use of fossil fuels, thereby disregarding existing environmental regulations. So it is unlikely that the us will meet the targets

