

Climate hot in Paris—Perry Sioshansi's Letter from America

Don't expect any miracles, but there's no harm in being hopeful.

There are hopeful signs that something useful may be achieved at the United Nation's Conference of Parties (COP) to be held in Paris in December 2015. That, of course, depends on one's definition of useful. Most observers expect a series of unilateral announcements and pledges from governments and government leaders, many with little or no legal binding or enforcement.

President Obama has already made one such pledge—26% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 levels by 2025—signalling what the official US position may be. The European position is also already known, as are a number of other countries.

China, the biggest global emitter of greenhouse gases, has also stated that it plans to cap its emissions by 2030—a hopeful sign but not as ambitious as many would like. India, another big polluter, is likely to mostly ask for forgiveness, as will a number of other developing economies. Mexico, for example, has pledged to curb the growth of greenhouse gases by 25% from its current trajectory by 2030, noteworthy given that it is an emerging economy. The usual posturing from the usual suspects.

In case of the US, Obama's announcement should be taken in the context of the political divide that separates Obama's Administration from the Republican-dominated US Congress and against the background of the 2016 presidential elections—already playing out in the daily news. The next US president, depending on who wins, can either reinforce or obliterate Obama's current energy and environmental policies and any US pledges made in Paris.

Further complicating the picture is that climate change sceptics and deniers—there is a fine line dividing the two—have successfully managed to confuse the US public to the point where few average citizens know what to think, that is if they think at all on climate issues. That emboldens politicians who support the big oil, gas, coal and utility lobby, and are, in turn, supported by the same.

A series of surveys conducted between 2008 and 2013 by Yale Project on Climate Communication and the George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication suggests that 63% of Americans believe that the globe is warming—with significant variations from state to state, based on age, gender, education, income, and of course, political affiliation.

The bottom line is that Americans, by and large, agree that the world is warming. Critically, however, they disagree on what is the cause—e.g., anthropogenic carbon emissions from burning of fossil fuels—and what, if anything, should or could be done about it.

And that is precisely what climate sceptics/deniers want the public opinion to be. The tobacco industry—with apologies to the energy sector for using the imperfect analogy—successfully used a similar tactic to delay the introduction of smoking regulations.

Despite mounting scientific evidence that smoking was harmful to smokers, the tobacco lobby spread uncertainty about the cause and effect. It delayed the introduction of mandatory health warnings and anti-smoking laws by decades—killing untold thousands in the process. This, of course, is not to say that a warming climate is killing people but to suggest that a way must be found to address the fundamental driver—over reliance on fossil fuels, whose consumption is perversely encouraged by generous subsidies and policies that keep them at artificially low prices.

The Yale research suggests that fewer Americans are aware of the scientific consensus about climate change, perhaps a sign of the intense politicisation of the topic. Since 1991, temperatures across the US have risen on average between 1°F-1.5°F, slightly less so in the Southeast, according to the latest National Climate Assessment.

The colours on the accompanying map (*next page*) trace temperature changes between 1991-2012 compared with the historical records from the 1901-1960 average (1951-1980 average for Alaska and Hawaii). The records clearly show that the 2001-2012 period was warmer than any previous decade in virtually every region.

What harm could possibly come from a little more CO₂ in the atmosphere and a little warmer temperature? For answer, ask farmers in drought-stricken California. *From Boom to Bust? Climate Risk in the Golden State*, a report published in early April 2015 lists extreme heat, shifting precipitation patterns and rising sea levels threatening California's infrastructure, agriculture, tourism and water resources among the problems facing California. It says, among other things, that:

- by the end of the century, summers in California are likely be hotter than in Texas and Louisiana today, and the average number of extremely hot days—temperatures above 95°F—will likely double or triple;
- rising temperatures are likely to increase electricity use for cooling, driving up demand and costs; and
- nearly 7,700 additional heat-related deaths per year may be expected by late century—more than twice the average number of traffic deaths in the state today.

A prolonged drought reduced hydro generation in 2014 46% below the prior 5-year average. Had it not been for the rapid rise of solar energy, the hydro shortfall would have been far more pronounced. 2015 promises to be drier yet.

One can, of course, argue that the California's drought has nothing to do with climate change, or that climate is warming, but it has nothing to do with fossil fuels, or any number of other plausible arguments. And that will simply delay the day of the reckoning.

Politicians in the US, like politicians elsewhere, read the news headlines and are sensitive to public opinion in deciding on how to vote, such as the following 3 recent polls:

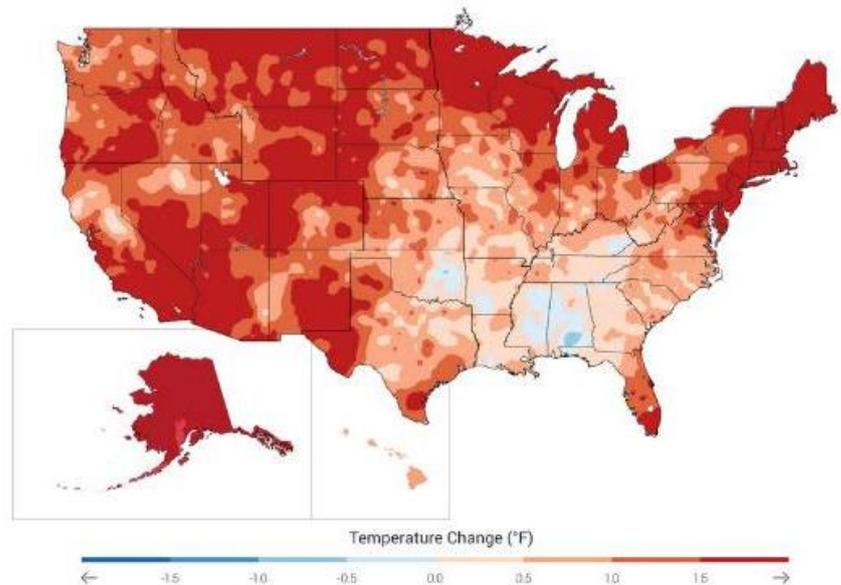
- a recent New York Times poll reported that, "An overwhelming majority of Americans, including half of Republicans, support government action to curb climate change while two-thirds said they were more likely to vote for political candidates who campaign on fighting climate change";
- an ABC poll concluded that, "By 59-31%, Americans say they want the next president to be someone who favours government action to address climate change; while 58% said it is an important issue"; and
- another poll by Benenson Strategy Group claims that, "72% of likely 2016 voters support an international agreement on climate change."

The official US position in Paris in December will undoubtedly be dictated by President Obama, who sees climate change among his lasting legacies. The US Congress and candidates for 2016 election are likely to take other positions based on which way the political wind is blowing.

Perry Sioshansi is a specialist in electricity sector restructuring. He is founder and president of Menlo Energy Economics and is the editor and publisher of EEnergy Informer, from which we have sourced this article, and which we commend.

If you would like to contribute to Nutwood, contact Andy Mower on 01 603 604403.

Latest National Climate Assessment shows rising temperatures nearly everywhere



Source: Yale project on climate communication