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In Bonn, Trump’s Answer To Global Warming? Drill, Baby, Drill!

By: Elizabeth Kolbert, November 15, 2017

Every year around this time, negotiators from across the globe meet in one city or another—Montreal, Marrakech, Copenhagen, Paris—to resolve that the world really ought come up with a plan to do something about climate change. This year’s Conference of the Parties, the twenty-third such gathering, is taking place in Bonn, and in addition to the usual impediments to progress—mistrust, inequality, bad faith—there’s now the Trump Administration to contend with. On Monday, the U.S. delegation used its sole official appearance at cop23 to tout fossil fuels.

“Promoting coal at a climate summit is like promoting tobacco at a cancer summit,” the former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who was in Bonn for the cop, observed. Protesters at the event sang songs and then walked out, leaving the hall half empty.

Also on Monday, a group of scientists reported that global carbon emissions, which had been flat for the past few years, were once again on the rise. The group predicted that industrial CO2 emissions in 2017 would total thirty-seven billion tons, which is about two per cent more than in 2016, and that this figure would likely climb again in 2018. “World backsliding on curbing carbon emissions,” summed up a headline in the Bangor Daily News.

Then, on Tuesday, the International Energy Agency, which is based in Paris, released its annual “World Energy Outlook.” One of the agency’s key findings is that global energy demand will continue to rise through 2040. Another is that, owing to technological advances like fracking, the United States is poised to become a major exporter of fossil fuels. “By the mid-2020s, the United States [will] become the world’s largest liquefied natural gas exporter and a few years later a net exporter of oil,” the agency predicts. It’s hard to say which of these announcements was the most depressing, but, on some level, it doesn’t really matter, since they’re all connected.

One way to interpret what the Trump Administration is up to with its absurd denials of climate science is as a play for time. Someday, the world will have to get serious about climate change, and at that point fossil-fuel use will have to decline dramatically. Whatever the Administration can do to put off that day will benefit American producers of fossil fuels. In a world where energy demand is continuing to rise, many tens of billions of dollars stand to be made.

However incompetent the Administration may be in other realms, it has proven itself remarkably adept in this one. As David Roberts put it, in Vox, “Trump has been erratic and unpredictable in many ways, but when it comes to fossil fuels, there is no wavering.” Consider, for example, the Paris Agreement. The accord, forged with the help of President Barack Obama at cop21, is not, by itself, going to halt the rise in

emissions. But, if countries abide by its provisions, investment in fossil fuels will, sooner rather than later, have to start to drop. The Trump Administration has tried to insure that this doesn't happen by announcing its intention to withdraw from the accord. Last week, Syria announced that it would sign the agreement, leaving the United States the only country in the world to decline to participate. ("We have even been surpassed by a country embattled by civil war," Slate noted.)

Here at home, the Administration has promoted fossil fuels so aggressively that, at times, its efforts have bordered on self-parody. A comprehensive list of its fossil-fuel-boosting activities would fill several Web posts; here are just a few highlights:

In April, the President signed an executive order aimed at expanding offshore drilling in the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans. The order also directs the Commerce Secretary, Wilbur Ross, to review the country's marine sanctuaries, with an eye toward opening them to energy exploration.

In July, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke announced that his department will hold more frequent lease sales on public lands, and cut the time required to obtain a drilling permit.

In August, the Department of Energy issued a report calling for changes in the way that energy markets are regulated, which would funnel money to the coal industry.

Next month, the President is expected to announce that he is cutting the size of Bears Ears National Monument, in southeastern Utah, by almost a million acres, or roughly ninety per cent. The land removed from protection could then be leased for drilling. **"The ship of state is about to be turned into the Exxon Valdez," Dan Becker, the director of the Safe Climate Campaign, told the Washington Post.**

What's key about all these moves is that they will lead to more investment in fossil-fuel infrastructure. Once a new offshore oil platform or natural-gas well is completed, it's likely to live out its useful life. (Call it establishing facts in the ground.) At events like cop23, this is known as "lock in"; the more fossil-fuel infrastructure that gets built, the more carbon emissions get "locked in." Whatever happens (or doesn't) this week in Bonn, the Trump Administration and its cronies in the fossil-fuel industry—the two groups are, admittedly, often interchangeable—are making it that much harder to curtail emissions. The future that's being "locked in" looks increasingly grim.