

Alternative US group honouring Paris climate accord demands 'seat at the table'

The America's Pledge group claims to represent US majority opinion on carbon emissions, despite Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement



Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg at the US Climate Action Center. Photograph: Friedemann Vogel/EPA

Jonathan Watts in Bonn

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The United Nations should give a "seat at the table" to a powerful group of US states, cities, tribes and businesses that are committed to taking action on climate change, Michael Bloomberg has urged.

In an apparent bid to circumvent US president Donald Trump's moves to withdraw from the Paris accord, the billionaire philanthropist also said the world body should accept an alternative set of US climate commitments alongside national pledges to reduce carbon emissions.

The former New York mayor was speaking at the UN's climate change conference in Bonn, Germany, during the launch of the America's Pledge report. The report has found that US states, cities and businesses that have signed up to reduce greenhouse gas emissions together represent a GDP of about \$10tn. That is more than any nation except the US and China.

"If this group were a country, we'd be the third-biggest economy in the world. We should have a seat at the table," Bloomberg said. "If Washington won't lead, then mayors and governors will."

Bloomberg – who is also a UN special envoy for cities and climate change – was among a high-level alternative US delegation that included Californian governor Jerry Brown, four senators, several mayors and representatives of major US corporations. Together they claim to represent a majority of people in the US.

"The American government may have pulled out of the Paris accord but the American people are still committed to its goals," Bloomberg said. "And there is not a thing the government can do to stop us."

The rival US group have overshadowed the muted official US delegation, which has shown the priorities of the Trump White House by scheduling a meeting at the talks focusing on the future of coal.

The packed America's Pledge launch event took place in the US Climate Action Center, an inflatable dome that the alternative US delegation is using as its headquarters. Although it is outside the official conference hall, its close proximity, huge space and packed crowds highlighted the high status of the rival body.

It also got a top-level endorsement from the organisers. "They may be non-state actors, but they are leaders in this process. America's Pledge sends a powerful message to the world that America is still in the game," said Frank Bainimarama, the prime minister of Fiji, which is the president of this year's UN conference.

Patricia Espinosa, executive secretary of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, said she would take the report to the official parties at the conference centre. "We're standing at the edge of something truly special," she said in an upbeat assessment of the progress made so far in the US and elsewhere on the adoption of clean energy such as wind and solar. She said the world was moving from the information age to the "age of renewal."

In an atmosphere often reminiscent of a campaign rally, Senator Ed Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts, said the solar industry in the US had created 50,000 jobs in 2016 – equivalent to the entire coal mining industry – and that the renewable industry as a whole would employ half a million workers by 2020. "This is the greatest blue-collar job creation in two generations," he said.

Many major US corporations have also signed up to the campaign. Laura Phillips, senior vice-president of sustainability at Walmart, said a transition to clean energy made economic sense.

She said the world's biggest retailer had enough solar cells on its supermarkets to cover 190 football fields and had saved \$1bn in fuel bills: "It's good for business, it reduced emissions and it's good for our community."



Activists protesting California Governor Jerry Brown's speech at the America's Pledge launch event. Photograph: Martin Meissner/AP

But critics argue carbon trading and massive investments in technology do not deal with the root causes of the problem, which are overconsumption and capitalism. The event was interrupted by protesters who raised banners declaring "False Solution for the Planet" and chanted "We are the solution. Don't trade pollution!" in reference to California's carbon cap-and-trade scheme.

In a raucous five-minute exchange with the hecklers, Jerry Brown accepted that governments need to do more, but he said it was necessary to make the transition in stages rather

than all at once.

"That is good noise," he said to the chanters. "But it doesn't get the job done. You need a plan ... the perfect can be the enemy of the better."

Several speakers highlighted the progress made in their regions.

Pittsburgh mayor Bill Peduto said a blue-green alliance between labour unions and renewables companies had revitalised his city after the post-industrial decline of its traditional steel industry.

"Time goes in only one direction. If you wait for the mills and mines to reopen, you'll be left in the past," he said.

One nation, two tribes: opposing visions of US climate role on show in Bonn

Donald Trump has pulled the US out of the Paris accord – but other Americans are standing with the world to help fight the 'existential crisis' of global warming



The alternative US dome – which is marked with the hashtag #wearestillin – is the biggest pavilion at the climate talks. Photograph: Ronald Wittek/EPA

Oliver Milman and Jonathan Watts

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Deep schisms in the US over climate change are on show at the UN climate talks in Bonn – where two sharply different visions of America's role in addressing dangerous global warming have been put forward to the world.

Donald Trump's decision to pull the US out of the [Paris climate agreement](#) has created a vacuum into which dozens of state, city and business leaders have leapt, with the aim of convincing other countries at the international summit that the administration is out of kilter with the American people.

The counter-Trump movement in Bonn is being spearheaded by Jerry Brown, the governor of California, and Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire former mayor of New York. Brown, in particular, has assumed the role of a de facto US leader, [scheduling](#) more than two dozen events to agitate for renewable energy and emissions cuts to combat what he has called an "existential crisis".

A [US Climate Action Center](#) has been set up for delegates in Bonn, representing the climate change priorities of several thousand US cities, states, tribes and businesses. Corporate giants Mars, Walmart and Citi are expected to push for action on climate change. The center is in lieu of an official US presence – for the first time, the US government won't have a pavilion at the annual UN climate summit.

At the razzamatazz opening of the alternative US centre on Thursday, California state senator Ricardo Lara told the audience: "Greetings from the official resistance to the Trump administration." Pausing for cheers and applause, he said: "Let's relish being rebels. Despite what happens in DC, we're still here."

Guests were served free jelly donuts and coffee. "It's the least we can do after Trump's announcement that we are leaving," said one US activist.

At 2,500 sq metres, the alternative US dome – which is marked with the hashtag #wearestillin – is the biggest pavilion at the climate talks. Organisers say it is probably the biggest for any US group in the history of climate conference.

"It's nice that it's hard to miss. This is big because our movement is big," said one of the organisers, Lou Leonard of WWF. "Here we show energy, momentum and confidence. It would slow negotiations down if people in the halls were thinking the US is not with them."

Following recent decisions by Nicaragua and Syria to join the Paris pact, [the US stands alone](#) as the only country in the world to oppose the deal.

"The US is now split and world opinion is going with the state and local players, rather than the federal player," said Jonathan Pershing, who was the US government's special envoy on climate change until last year.

"The US is at odds with every other country in the world and yet we see it represented by a federal government as well as competing governors, mayors and members of Congress. It reflects an enormous tension in the US political system over climate change."

The Trump administration has sent a delegation to Bonn, with the US still officially engaged in implementing the Paris deal until it is able to exit in 2020. Thomas Shannon, an experienced state department diplomat who has previously voiced concern about climate change, is leading the US delegation, assisted by Trigg Talley, who was Pershing's deputy.

The White House has [confirmed](#) that the US will promote the "efficient" use of coal, nuclear energy and natural gas as an answer to climate change in a presentation to delegates in Bonn. Trump has vowed to revive America's ailing coal sector but this message is likely to provoke outrage on the global stage.



The alternative US climate pavilion in Bonn. Dozens of state, city and business leaders are aiming to show the world that Trump is out of kilter with the American people. Photograph: Ronald Wittek/EPA

"It will raise hackles," said Pershing. "It's not an argument that people will accept internationally."

Differences may sharpen next week when countries start to discuss financing plans, but so far observers say it has mostly been business as usual.

"We are seeing 196 parties trying to move forward and put the Paris accord into effect. They don't want to let the US impede that progress," said David Waskow of the World Resources Institute.

But participants from other nations said the change is already apparent.

"It's as though the US negotiators have been dipped in aspic," said one delegate. "They are scared stiff of upsetting the White House. They try to be constructive, but they don't want that known."

Another delegate said: "We have lost the leadership the US used to provide. They have the best negotiating team and they are usually put forward strong arguments, but in talks this year, they have been quiet. You can feel they are a little lost. It must be so hard for them now. I sympathise."

"I think it's all going to be a little awkward," said Sue Biniatz, a former state department official who was the lead US lawyer at climate negotiations for two decades. "In the past the US was the leader and brought a lot of ideas to the table. That will be a loss. But other countries, rightly or wrongly, think the US may stay in under some circumstances so I wouldn't expect too much hostility."

A coalition of 14 US states, including California and New York, have said they are on track to meet the US target of a 26-28% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2025, compared to 2005 levels. The goal was set by Barack Obama's administration as part of the Paris agreement between 195 nations to avoid dangerous global warming of more than 2C.

Brown has raised his profile in recent months by meeting China's leadership to discuss clean energy technology and becoming a special adviser for states and regions during the Bonn talks.

On Tuesday, he met EU leaders in Brussels as a prelude to talks on how to link California's cap and trade emissions system with the similar emissions mechanism used by the 28-state bloc. California has a legislated goal to cut its emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

"We are truly facing a challenge unprecedented in human history," Brown said in a speech to the European parliament. "We have to completely transform to a zero-carbon world. We have to do it faster than most people are probably thinking about. 2050 is too late."

In a nod to the clout of large US states, Brown later included two of them when naming countries that could do more on climate change – "the United States, Texas, California, Russia, India."

European leaders welcomed Brown's words.

"The approach of Mr Trump is not necessarily as helpful as it might be. But we are delighted to have Governor Brown here because it shows there is a strong commitment from the US," said Antonio Tajani, the president of the European parliament.

However, governors such as Brown or Andrew Cuomo, his New York counterpart, cannot officially take the place of the US president in UN climate talks. Their emissions pledges do not supersede the official US position and, in any case, the 14 committed states only have influence over around half of total US emissions.

Analysts have warned that without national leadership, the US is in danger of missing its emissions reduction goals and will jeopardize international efforts to stave off 2C of warming, which would lead to elevated sea level rise, intensified droughts, heatwaves and wildfires.

Brian Schatz, a Democratic senator from Hawaii who is attending the Bonn talks, said members of Congress, including Republicans, were concerned over how the withdrawal has hurt America's standing in the world.

"If you show up at a climate conference to talk about coal, you're likely to be ignored," he said. "I think the We Are Still In delegation will get more attention than the executive branch. "We've gone from the indispensable leader to being the only country not engaged in climate change. Many people in Congress are troubled not only from a climate standpoint but a geopolitical standpoint. China is happy to take that leadership from us."

US groups honouring Paris climate pledges despite Trump

US states, cities and businesses signed up to 'America's pledge' to combat global warming have a combined economic power equal to the world's third-biggest economy



The huge alternative US Climate Action Centre at Bonn. 20 US states, more than 50 of its largest cities, and 60 businesses have committed to emissions reduction goals. Photograph: Jonathan Watts for the Guardian

Fiona Harvey and Jonathan Watts in Bonn

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The US states, cities and businesses that have signed up to reduce greenhouse gas emissions despite president Donald Trump's threats to withdraw from the Paris agreement would, if put together, have the clout of the world's third biggest economy, after the US and China.

To date, 20 US states and more than 50 of its largest cities, along with more than 60 of the biggest businesses in the US, have committed to emissions reduction goals.

Added together, they have an economic power of about \$10tn, placing this group behind only the US as a whole (\$18.6tn) and China (\$11tn) in terms of GDP.

On Saturday at the [Bonn conference on climate change](#), these groups joined together to make "America's pledge", a commitment to combat global warming, in stark opposition to the Trump administration.

"This is very powerful," said Paul Bodnar, a former lead negotiator at the climate talks for the US under Barack Obama. "These states and cities would be larger than 195 out of the 197 countries signed up to the Paris agreement."

[Michael Bloomberg](#), the former mayor of New York, led the group in vowing to take measures, such as reducing coal-fired power and investing in renewable energy and efficiency, which would substantially reduce their carbon output.

But some delegates want the companies and local governments involved to go further, by submitting reports on their progress towards their emissions-cutting goals to be subject to the kind of monitoring and accountability that is required from national governments under the UN process. They have put forward a draft text which, if accepted, would mean such voluntary commitments were made in line with UN standards, and could therefore be included in the national greenhouse gas inventories required from countries.

Kevin Conrad, of Papua New Guinea, told the Guardian: "We welcome their contributions, but they should be accountable [on their progress in meeting their voluntary goals]. Will they be willing to be reviewed on their results, not just on the blather?"

He said the draft text was aimed at giving these contributions "a legitimacy" under the UN's rules. "They should be transparent," he said. "We do not want to pre-judge America's Pledge, we just want rigour on the results."

The group's commitments fall outside the pledges under the landmark [2015 Paris agreement](#), and are likely to fall short of the requirements on carbon-cutting under the pact. Trump has vowed to withdraw the US from this agreement, the first to bind developed and developing countries to a specific temperature goal.

At the [Bonn COP23 talks](#), scheduled to continue to the end of the week, nations are discussing how to improve their pledges on cutting carbon in line with scientific advice. Under the Paris agreement, they must hold global temperature rises to no more than 2C, which scientists say is the limit of safety, beyond which climate change is likely to become catastrophic and irreversible.

Current pledges [under the Paris agreement are inadequate](#) to reach this goal and it is estimated they would bring the world to [3C of warming](#), which would cause drastic changes in sea level rises, bring droughts and floods to many areas of the world, and make agriculture impossible in huge swaths of the globe.

However, consensus on how to strengthen the pledges is proving elusive, and is unlikely to be finalised at these talks.

Meanwhile, the Trump White House has indicated its priorities, to the consternation of many delegates, by scheduling a meeting at the talks [focusing on the future of coal](#) and how its use can be continued with new technologies.

The America's Pledge report will be released [in the alternative US headquarters](#) at the talks, the [US Climate Action Center](#). The giant inflatable dome sits on the edge of the conference – which many of its supporters claim is a sign of its endorsement as a semi-official player.

Despite the geographical proximity of the "America's Pledge" delegation, there are limits to what non-state actors can do. They are excluded from many of the technical talks and cannot tap into federal funds that states use to finance commitments to slow climate change or reduce its impacts. More importantly, it is harder for them to set a course for the country.

But while that is missing, Antha Williams, head of the Bloomberg Philanthropies environment team, said it was necessary to fill the void.

"It would be better if we saw leadership from the White House, but the overarching point is that cities, states and companies that represent more than half of the US are showing their support for climate action."

Nick Nuttall, communications chief of UN Climate Change, said the organisers were willing to work constructively with non-state actors.

"We are extremely supportive of the whole mass of cities, states and territories who have been aligning themselves with the Paris agreement," he said. "American cities and states have been very active, which is welcome – and it mirrors what is happening elsewhere in the world."

His comments were echoed by several delegates.

"We don't turn a blind eye to anyone," said Antonio Marcondes, the chief negotiator for Brazil. "We talk to the federal government and we have been approached by non-state bodies. Our policy is that we are willing to work with anyone who can move this process forward."

But some climate activists warned against expecting too much from the America's Pledge team.

Thanu Yakupitiyage, of the NGO [350.org](#) said the climate pledges by many mayors and governors were a welcome step, but she urged still greater ambition and concrete policies to phase out fossil fuels.

"America's Pledge is a start and we'll be holding our elected officials, including governor Jerry Brown, to his word. As we look towards the climate summit that the governor has announced for 2018, we want more than words; we want a tangible action plan and steps taken," she said.