

Big role for U.S. at climate talks despite withdrawal from Paris deal

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OSLO/LONDON (Reuters) - The United States will play a big role at global talks next month on shaping the Paris agreement on climate change, to the dismay of some nations that want Washington sidelined because of President Donald Trump's plan to withdraw from the deal.

FILE PHOTO: Steam rises from the cooling towers of the coal power plant of RWE, one of Europe's biggest electricity and gas companies in Niederaussem, north-west of Cologne, Germany March 3, 2016. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay/File Photo

U.S. officials have said they will be constructive at the annual 195-nation climate meeting in Bonn, Germany, from Nov. 6-17 to work on a "rule book" for the 2015 Paris plan to shift the world economy from fossil fuels this century.

But other nations are torn between welcoming or berating Washington's envoys after Trump's decided in June to pull out and instead promote the U.S. fossil fuel industry.

Washington retains its place in the talks because the Paris pact stipulates that no country can formally pull out before November 2020.

"The Trump regime really needs to walk away and not hold the rest of the world hostage to the President's ineptitude," said Ian Fry, who represents Tuvalu, a low-lying Pacific island nation at risk of rising sea levels and storm surges.

He told Reuters that Trump's pro-coal policies, and doubts that climate change is caused by man-made greenhouse gas emissions, could undermine urgency at the meeting of senior officials and environment ministers.

The White House did not respond to requests for comment and the State Department has not set up a briefing ahead of the meeting, as it traditionally has.

This year is on track to be the second warmest since records began in the 19th century, behind 2016. Scientists say rising temperatures will stoke ever more powerful hurricanes, floods and wildfires.

But U.S. delegates at preparatory meetings said they will play a positive role in Bonn, said Nazhat Shameem Khan, chief negotiator of Fiji which will preside at the meeting.

The U.S. approach "send positive signals ... that this will not be a destructive COP," she said, using the shorthand for Conference of the Parties. It is not yet clear if any U.S. political leaders will attend.

SYRIA, NICARAGUA

Many U.S. allies, including France, Canada and Britain, hope to coax Trump to end up staying in the pact which is backed by all nations except Syria. Nicaragua, which had judged the deal too weak, ratified

it this month.

In a sign that most nations are willing to permit a strong U.S. role, an internal U.N. document obtained by Reuters shows that a U.S. official, Andrew Rakestraw, will co-lead a section of the talks with a Chinese counterpart on ensuring transparent rules for the Paris agreement.

And the U.S. delegation will be led by Thomas Shannon, a career diplomat who gave a speech in 2015 calling climate change “one of the world’s greatest challenges”.

The meeting will work on a rule book, due to be completed in 2018, for implementing the Paris agreement on issues such as the reporting of greenhouse gas emissions and how national emissions will be checked.

Washington and many other developed nations have long sought tough rules to bind emerging nations such as China and India, which have been wary of outside oversight.

And many delegates expect the U.S. officials, many of whom were architects of the Paris accord under former President Barack Obama, will contribute to clear, enforceable rules that will be in U.S. interests whether it is in or out of the deal.

“Having the United States at the table with good negotiators who can take this forward is a win-win,” said Paula Caballero, a director of the World Resources Institute think-tank and formerly a climate negotiator for Colombia.

The treatment of the United States is likely to hinge on whether Washington limits itself to technical details of the rule book or promotes Trump’s pro-coal political agenda.

“It is quite likely that the U.S. will be sidelined ... unless they play a constructive role,” said Elisa de Wit, head of climate change at global law firm Norton Rose Fulbright.

Outside the conference center, a U.S. network called “We Are Still In” will highlight actions by states, cities and other non-federal groups to implement the Paris agreement and shift to wind, solar and other clean energies.

It says Trump’s pro-coal policies will be only a blip in a long-term economic shift this century. “We need to make sure the world maintains confidence in our ability to move forward,” said Washington State Governor Jay Inslee.