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Climate Change: Obama Is Making Promises He Can't Keep

Paul "Chip" Knappenberger

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On April 22, Earth Day, leaders from countries around the world will attend a grand signing ceremony at the United Nations, officially reaffirming the greenhouse gas reduction pledges they made at last December's U.N. climate conference in Paris.

Instead of rushing to reaffirm that pledge, President Obama should be working to rescind it.

Under the Paris Agreement, most major greenhouse gas-emitting countries offered rather timid emissions targets that aligned with existing projections. In contrast, President Obama pledged an aggressive goal of reducing U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels by the year 2025.

That is a promise he cannot keep.

Indeed, in the time since President Obama rallied international support at the Paris conference by extolling the U.S. leadership role in addressing climate change, a confluence of reality checks has revealed much of what he said to have been a grand illusion.

For starters, less than two months after the president told the delegates that "we've said yes to the first-ever set of national standards limiting the amount of carbon pollution our power plants can release into the sky," the Supreme Court said "not so fast." By issuing a stay on the EPA's Clean Power Plan, the Court signaled its concern that the central pillar of Obama's plan to achieve his promised emissions reduction may not be altogether legal.

The Court's ultimate decision likely rests with the November election and the subsequent justice appointment. This is expected to delay the implementation of the Clean Power Plan by several years, if not overturn it completely.

Either outcome will be a major blow to the timetable for Obama's promised emissions reductions. And no one is claiming that the promised target can be achieved without the Clean Power Plan (and then some).

To make matters worse, the EPA has increased its estimate of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and decreased its estimate of recent emissions decline. This not only takes the shine off of Obama's claim in Paris that "over the last seven years, we've made...ambitious reductions in our carbon emissions," but it also means the road to the president's target just got a lot steeper.

The EPA's new numbers come in light of evidence that methane emissions—a greenhouse gas some 25 times stronger than carbon dioxide—have increased substantially over the past decade rather than declining as the EPA has previously reported.

The source of this increase has not been definitely identified, although oil and natural gas recovery operations are in the crosshairs. But no matter the source, growing methane emissions further jeopardizes Obama's emissions reduction timeline.

And in a last ditch effort to make the situation seem rosier than it really is, a new report from the State Department employs a bit of creative accounting that invokes a large increase in the amount of carbon dioxide that it expects U.S. forests to uptake over the next decade.

The more carbon dioxide the Administration assumes to be taken out of the atmosphere by forests and other plants—after all, carbon dioxide is a plant fertilizer—the fewer the reductions in actual emissions have to be to hit the target.

The "optimistic" outlook from the State Department relies on incentivized land-use changes to increase the carbon sink by some 25 percent over the next 10 years. According to EPA numbers, over the past five years the size of the US carbon sink hasn't changed at all.

All of this —the stayed Clean Power Plan, growing methane emissions, and overly optimistic projections—undermine the viability of Obama's pledge. Add to the mix energy efficiency measures which don't work as well as advertised, low gas prices and a growing economy that is still tightly linked to fossil fuels, and you arrive at the unimpeachable conclusion that we are not going to come close to meeting the emissions pledges made by the president.

Even the recently extended green subsidies for wind and solar, which may slow the bleeding in the short term, come up far short in producing the greenhouse gas emissions reduction necessary to reach our target by 2025.

The one pledge under the agreement that the president has managed to keep alive is his promise to fund the international Green Climate Fund to the tune of \$2.5 billion. He made the first \$500 million installment just last month.

This payout may appease some countries enough to keep them from walking away from the agreement citing U.S. hypocrisy, but it shouldn't appease us here at home, where the money comes from.

Putting our name on an international agreement we all know is a sham doesn't bolster efforts to curb climate change. Rather, it casts them as disingenuous. This is something that we should not have to pay for, now, or in the future.

It's high time to walk back our Paris promise.

Paul "Chip" Knappenberger is assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.