The Paris Climate Deal Is Now in Force. What Comes Next?

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The Paris Agreement was hailed as a turning point for world governments tackling climate change, and it has now come into effect. What does this mean for the world — and where do we go from here?

On Friday, November 4, the Paris Agreement went into effect, meaning that the agreement made last year by nearly 200 international delegates must now be honored. To recognize the consensus coming into force, the United Nations stated that it is a moment to celebrate – and to take concerted action.

"We remain in a race against time," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon emphasized. "Now is the time to strengthen global resolve, do what science demands and seize the opportunity to build a safer, more sustainable world for all."

What happened at the Paris climate talks?

The Paris climate agreement is a wide-ranging and complex international pact, but it boils down to a few relatively simple principles.

Last December, world governments agreed with the overwhelming scientific data stating that global warming must be kept below 2ºC over industrial levels to stave off potentially catastrophic environmental changes. The agreement also highlighted the preferred 1.5ºC limit.

To accomplish this, nations made a number of promises.

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For example, the United States and the UK agreed to stricter enforcement of greenhouse gas emission caps and committed to allocate more resources for green energy technologies. They also committed to subsidizing poorer nations as they make the switch and compensating countries that have been hit hardest by the effects of climate change to date.

While developing nations like India would not agree to the same caps, countries were able to arrive at a compromise: Developing nations would be allowed to continue actively mining for and using fossil fuels but would scale that use down over the next decade and a half. Additionally, these countries would receive assistance in transitioning to green energy alternatives.

This arrangement intends to give developing nations access to the same kind of growth potential the West enjoyed while simultaneously trying to mitigate the damage produced by fossil fuel use.

Encouraging signs, but a long road ahead.

The actual activation of the agreement has come ahead of schedule. On October 5, 55 of the world's most polluting nations agreed to the deal, including the United States.

Because over half of the nations involved in the talks have now approved the deal, it was able to come into force 30 days later. The original time frame had predicted that the Paris Agreement would go into effect as late as 2020, so this firm commitment is a promising sign.

However, there are still many hurdles to overcome.

One is that there are over 100 nations still holding out on a firm commitment. What's more, the actual substance of the deal — or rather the extent to which those promises must be honored — isn't yet set in stone. Fears remain that the agreement could gradually erode by the time that more nations sign on.

However, the United States and other countries put forward a mechanism to ensure that nations could oversee each other's progress through international and independent reviews. If nations appear to be falling behind on their commitments, action can be taken through other mechanisms.

Unfortunately, reports on Germany and the UK's environmental actions have already shown cause for concern. But at the very least, we are now collecting data to try to remain on track with our climate change-fighting commitments.

Another big test will come as a result of the U.S. presidential and congressional elections.

According to most polls, Donald Trump is not predicted to win the election. In terms of climate change action, that is certainly a good thing given that Trump has made it abundantly clear he would put business interests –namely the fossil fuel industry — above the recommendations of all major scientific bodies and international governments.

While a Clinton presidency will need to maintain and build on the significant steps the Obama administration has made toward reducing the country's climate change impact, Congress will be in charge of creating new legislation to answer the commitments made at the COP21 Paris Agreement.

Unfortunately, the current Congress is actively hostile to those commitments. Another Congress with similar anti-science environmental policies could heavily retard efforts in the U.S., as well as impact other nations that view the country as one of the world's biggest polluters, but also a major agent of change. Voting for lawmakers who recognize the need for the Paris Agreement — and action to build on it — is a must.

This is just one example of how the complex nature of the agreement, intersecting as it does with the internal politics of so many nations and at varying levels, has led to a somewhat messy and imperfect system.

That said, one thing remains clear: The Paris Agreement is now in effect.

International leaders took an unprecedented step forward to tackle climate change, and other politicians – such as the mayors of the world's biggest cities – have shown they want to do the same. The seeds for change have been planted, and there is an appetite to make good on those promises.

It remains vital, though, that we don't lose that energy. We must continue to feed the growth of green energy technologies to ensure a hospitable planet for future generations.

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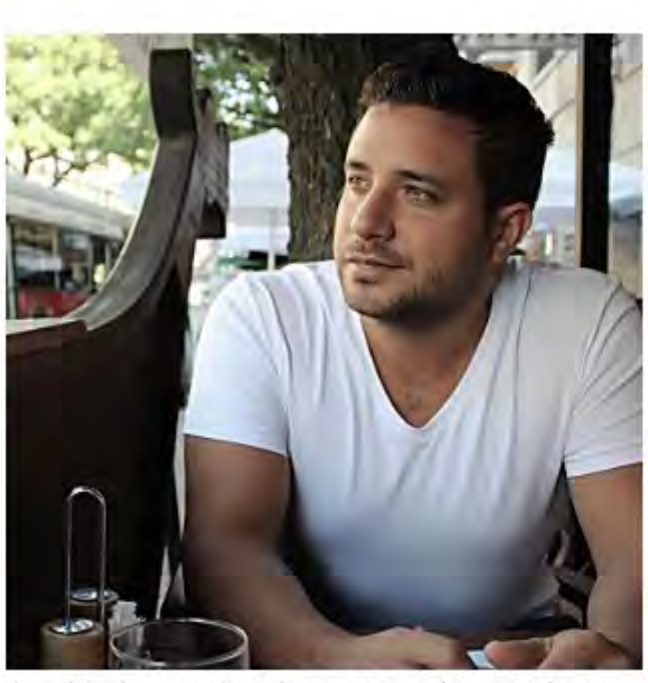
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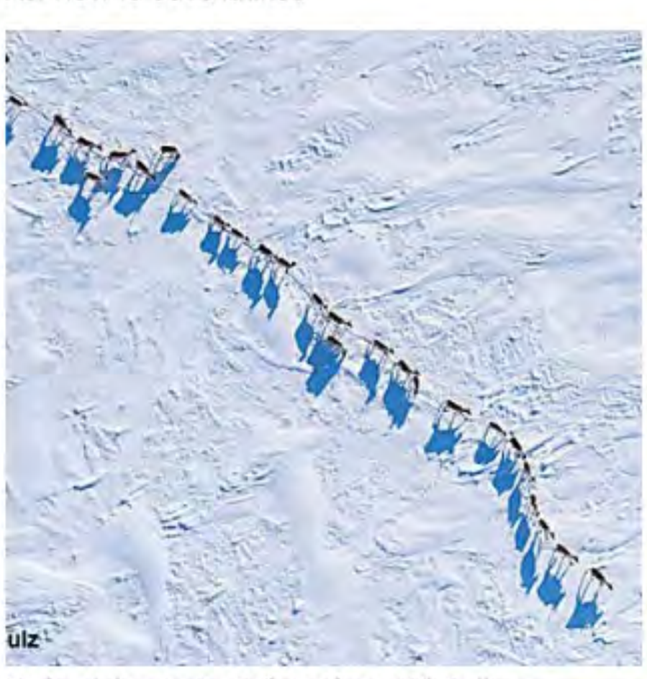

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