Fact Checker Analysis

Fact-checking President Trump’s claims on the Paris climate change deal

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Fact Checkers Glenn Kessler and Michelle Lee examine several of President Trump’s claims from his speech announcing the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate accord on Thursday.

In his speech announcing his decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord on climate change, President Trump frequently relied on dubious facts and unbalanced claims to make his case that the agreement would hurt the U.S. economy. Notably, he only looked at one side of the scale — claiming the agreement left the United States at a competitive disadvantage, harming U.S. industries. But he often ignored the benefits that could come from tackling climate change, including potential green jobs.

Trump also suggested that the United States was treated unfairly under the agreement. But each of the nations signing the agreement agreed to help lower emissions, based on plans they submitted. So the U.S. target was set by the Obama administration.

The plans are not legally binding, but developing and developed countries are treated differently because developed countries, on a per capita basis, often produce more greenhouse gases than developing countries. For instance, on a per capita basis, the United States in 2015 produced more than double the carbon dioxide emissions of China — and eight times more than India.

Here’s a roundup of various statements made by the president during his Rose Garden address:

“We’re getting out, but we will start to negotiate, and we will see if we can make a deal that’s fair.”

Each country set its own commitments under the Paris Accord, so Trump’s comment is puzzling. He could unilaterally change the commitments offered by President Barack Obama, which is technically allowed under the Accord. But there is no appetite to renegotiate the entire agreement, as made clear by various statements from world leaders after his announcement.
“China will be allowed to build hundreds of additional coal plants. So, we can’t build the plants, but they can, according to this agreement. India will be allowed to double its coal production by 2020.”

This is false. The agreement is non-binding and each nation sets its own targets. There is nothing in the agreement that stops the United States from building coal plants or gives the permission to China or India to build coal plants. In fact, market forces, primarily reduced costs for natural gas, have forced the closure of coal plants. China announced this year that it would cancel plans to build more than 100 coal-fired plants.

Gary Cohn, chairman of Trump’s National Economic Council, recently told reporters that “coal doesn’t even make that much sense anymore as a feedstock. Natural gas, which we have become an abundant producer, which we’re going to become a major exporter of, is such a cleaner fuel.”

“Compliance with the terms of the Paris accord and the onerous energy restrictions it has placed on the United States could cost America as much as 2.7 million lost jobs by 2025, according to the National Economic Research Associates. This includes 440,000 fewer manufacturing jobs — not what we need.”

Trump cited a slew of statistics from a study that was funded by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Council for Capital Formation, foes of the Paris Accord. So the figures must be viewed with a jaundiced eye. Moreover, the study assumed a scenario that no policy analyst expects — that the United States takes drastic steps to meet the Obama pledge of a 26 to 28 percent reduction in emissions by 2025.

Moreover, the study did not consider possible benefits from reducing climate change. A footnote says: The study “does not take into account potential benefits from avoided emissions. … The model does not take into consideration yet-to-be developed technologies that might influence the long-term cost.”

Trump also cited the impact by 2040, including a “cost to the economy” of nearly $3 trillion in lost gross domestic product. But in addition to an unrealistic scenario, that number must be viewed in context over more than two decades, so “$3 trillion” amounts to a reduction of 6 percent. The study concludes coal usage would almost disappear, but innovation in clean energy sources would slow considerably, which also raises the cost of complying with the commitments.

Environmentalists say greater investment in clean energy will lower costs and spur innovation. That may not be correct either, but it demonstrates how the outcomes in models of economic activity decades from now depend on the assumptions.

“Even if the Paris Agreement were implemented in full, with total compliance from all nations, it is estimated it would only produce a two-tenths of one degree — think of that, this much — Celsius reduction in global temperature by the year 2100. Tiny, tiny amount.”

Trump is referring to research by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in a 2015 report. Researchers found that proposed emissions cuts in the Paris plan would result in about 0.2 degrees (Celsius) less warming by 2100, if the cuts were not extended further.

John Reilly, lead author of the report, said he “disagrees completely” with Trump’s characterization that the 0.2 degree cut is a “tiny, tiny” amount that is not worth pursuing. As a part of the deal, countries
reevaluate their commitments and can exceed or extend their pledges beyond 2030. The intent of the
research was to say the Paris deal was a small step, and that more incremental steps need to be taken
in the long run.

“The logic that, ‘This isn’t making much progress on a serious problem, therefore we’re going to do
nothing,’ just doesn’t make sense to me. The conclusion should be — and our intended implication for
people was — not to overly celebrate Paris, because you still have a long journey in front of you. So
carb up for the rest of the trip,” Reilly said.

“The green fund would likely obligate the United States to commit potentially tens of
billions of dollars of which the United States has already handed over $1 billion.
Nobody else is even close. Most of them haven’t even paid anything — including funds
raided out of America’s budget for the war against terrorism. That’s where they came.”

It is incorrect that other countries have not contributed to the Green Climate Fund. In fact, 43
governments have pledged money to the fund, including nine developing countries. The countries have
pledged to pay $10.13 billion collectively, and the U.S. share is $3 billion. As of May 2017, the United
States has contributed $1 billion of the $3 billion it pledged.

Trump implies that the money was taken out of U.S. defense monies. But the U.S. contributions were
paid out of the State Department’s Economic Support Fund, one of the foreign assistance programs to
promote economic or political stability based on U.S. strategic interests. Republican lawmakers have
criticized the use of this fund, saying Congress designated the money to prioritize security, human rights
and other efforts unrelated to climate change. However, the payments were made with congressional
notification and meetings with congressional staff.

“China will be able to increase these emissions by a staggering number of years, 13. They can do whatever they want for 13 years. India makes its participation contingent on receiving billions and billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid from developed
countries.”

China, in its Paris Accord commitment, said that, compared to 2005 levels, it would seek to cut its
carbon emissions by 60 to 65 percent per unit of GDP by 2030. India said it would reduce its emissions
per unit of economic output by 33 to 35 percent below 2005 by 2030; the submission does seek foreign
aid to meet its goals and mitigate the costs.

Both countries pledge to reach these goals by 2030, meaning they are taking steps now to meet their
commitments. India, for instance, seeks to have renewable power make up 40 percent of its power base
by 2030, so it is investing heavily in solar energy. The country is now on track to become the world’s
third-largest solar power market in 2018, after China and the United States. China is also investing
heavily in renewable energy.

“Believe me, we have massive legal liability if we stay in.”

Trump is referring to concerns raised by White House counsel Don McGahn that staying in the Paris
agreement would bolster legal arguments of climate advocates challenging Trump’s decision to roll back
the Clean Power Plan.

The Clean Power Plan is a flagship environmental regulatory rule of the Obama administration, and
proposes to cut carbon emissions from existing power plants 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. It is
crucial to the United States meeting its carbon emissions reductions pledge in the Paris agreement. But
it has been placed on hold while under litigation.
According to Politico, McGahn raised concerns that the Paris agreement “could be cited in court challenges to Trump’s efforts to kill Obama’s climate rules. McGahn’s comments shocked State Department lawyers, who strongly reject both of those contentions, the sources said.”

“As someone who cares deeply about the environment, which I do, I cannot in good conscience support a deal that punishes the United States, which is what it does.”

For years, Trump has touted his strong record on the environment. But the evidence is quite slim. We [Politico] awarded Four Pinocchios to his claim that he is a “very big person when it comes to the environment,” who has “received awards on the environment.”

Environmentalists have criticized many of Trump’s projects, particularly for his plans to build a golf course on protected sand dunes and chopping down hundreds of trees for a golf course renovation. As a businessman, Trump or his property did win two environmental awards. In 2007, the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, N.J., received an award for “environmental stewardship through golf course maintenance, construction, education and research.” Three years later, the golf course was cited for a series of environmental violations.

In 2007, Trump won a “Green Space Award” for donating 435 acres of land to the state of New York. He had purchased the land to build a golf course, but withdrew plans after opposition from local residents and environmental restrictions. The land was never developed into a park, and New York closed it after budget cuts in 2010.