

We'll Always Have Paris: Why U.S. Withdrawal from the Agreement Won't Stop Us from Meeting Its Goals



Biomethane can be used to run heavy duty vehicles like busses —turning them climate positive. *Image credit: Kristain Baty, Flickr*

By Matt Tomich – Jun 7th, 2017

By deciding to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, President Trump has ceded U.S. climate leadership on the global stage. The U.S. will be joining Syria as the world's only refuseniks. The other non-signatory is Nicaragua, which didn't sign the agreement because it didn't go far enough.

The EU and China are stepping into the vacuum the U.S. leaves, asserting their climate leadership and spelling out exactly how they plan to meet their targets under Paris. With the U.S. pulling out, 21 percent of total emissions reductions the Paris agreement envisioned will have to come from somewhere else. China and Europe will need to play even bigger roles than they planned, and everyone else will have to step up their reductions targets.

But we need not give up hope for U.S. climate action, because American grassroots groups, environmental organizations, municipalities, individual states and business leaders can carry the ball. With or without a treaty or federal mandate, they can get the U.S. to the Paris goal of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050.

To put things in perspective, this was always going to be volunteer work, treaty or no treaty. The Paris agreement is a framework for voluntary action toward an aspirational goal and for reporting on progress. The burden of implementation was always on the coalition of the willing: states, cities, companies and citizens who understand the importance of acting to protect the climate.

Backing out of Paris is shameful, but doesn't stop the willing from acting – on the contrary. California, Colorado, Washington and other states are committed to ambitious GHG reduction. Cities from Los Angeles to New York have climate action plans that meet or exceed Paris goals.

But to implement them, we will have to address not just smokestack sectors like energy (electricity generation) and industry, but also the transportation, building, waste, and land use (including agriculture and forestry) sectors, which have surprisingly large climate footprints. Few realize that the single largest source of U.S. emissions is not energy or industry; it's transportation, which accounts for 25 percent of our GHG emissions. Transportation is also our single biggest opportunity, because practical solutions can transform its emissions today.

There's visible progress for light vehicles: recharging stations, improving batteries and diversifying electric cars. But the heavy transport sector including 10 million buses and trucks, has been harder to decarbonize, because it requires higher energy density than batteries or most renewable fuels have.

But now there's a renewable fuel that can power it: "biomethane" or "Renewable Natural Gas" (RNG). It's made by capturing methane gases generated from decomposing organic wastes — food and yard waste, manure, landfill gas and municipal wastewater. RNG is the lowest-carbon fuel available today, and its feedstocks are abundant everywhere. Compared to diesel, RNG can reduce GHG emissions up to 120 percent.

How can that be? RNG captures methane gases which would otherwise escape into the atmosphere, as organic wastes rot, and harnesses them as fuel. That can save more emissions than the fuel produces when burned in vehicles. Put another way, RNG is a *carbon-negative* transportation fuel; making and using it results in a net GHG reduction that actually improves the climate.

The Paris climate talks in 2015 were abuzz with futuristic speculation about high-tech carbon-negative energy strategies we might be able to invest in and develop in coming decades. Delegates realized such strategies would be needed to meet the emissions reductions goals. But RNG is the one carbon-negative strategy that exists now, and is already scaling up.

Almost 50 plants produce it, and 20,000 refuse trucks run on it. The entire Los Angeles transit bus fleet plans to switch to it entirely. Using proven commercial technology, enough RNG can be produced to displace more than a quarter of the diesel heavy-duty vehicles consume. Bus and truck fleets that convert to RNG will quickly meet and exceed the Paris goal of 80 percent emissions reduction compared to diesel. Other benefits include modest fuel prices, quieter engines, and cleaner air for millions of Americans.

The climate imperative is scientific, environmental, social and economic. Political ups and downs don't alter it. The good news is, whatever the federal government does or doesn't do, there are practical solutions like RNG to help us meet and even exceed our highest emissions reduction ambitions. In that sense, we'll always have Paris.

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