


Commentary: Time for a change of course by Trump on climate



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President Trump (Mark Wilson / Getty Images)

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President Trump has proposed a budget and signed a set of executive orders that essentially force all federal agencies and departments to abandon ongoing climate research. They also require a reassessment of all federal programs and requirements to slow the rate of climate disruption, and even abandon efforts to minimize its harmful impacts.

Given Trump's campaign declaration that climate change is a "hoax" devised by the Chinese, these measures are scarcely a surprise. Nonetheless, they are profoundly misguided and deeply troubling.

In addition to the obvious effects on human life on the planet, the Trump climate-change approach is almost certain to harm the nation's economy. Whether or not the administration withdraws from the Paris Accord on climate change, virtually all the rest of the world's nations are now on a path toward adopting renewable sources of electric energy — such as solar, wind, geothermal and tidal power. This accelerating trend is creating

a booming worldwide demand for renewable-energy equipment that is destined to create vast numbers of jobs in industries that manufacture it.

By ignoring this reality, the Trump administration is effectively killing American jobs and ceding an enormous opportunity to our economic rivals — China chief among them.

Moreover, the administration's climate policies are based on the demonstrably flawed premise that climate-change regulation would harm the economy and diminish the personal freedom that we cherish. In fact, evidence is ample that governmental regulation — taken as a whole — has no negative impact on national employment levels, nor has it blotted out the fundamental liberties that our Constitution protects. Neither is government regulation of greenhouse-gas emissions likely to require excessive or unreasonable sacrifices by ordinary Americans. Quite to the contrary, new technologies to create sustainable energy sources and mitigate the pollution from fossil-fuel-burning power plants would create jobs.

More obviously, the administration's climate policies fly in the face of a consensus among qualified scientists that climate change is primarily caused by human-generated emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxide and other greenhouse gasses; that climate disruption is already underway; and that it is creating grave risks of sea-level rise, flooding, droughts, devastating storms, dramatic losses of wildlife, and the spread of disease. Simply put, ignoring the overwhelming evidence supporting these conclusions — and accepting the skewed "science" of climate-change skeptics and the self-interested propaganda of fossil fuel companies — amounts to willfully and dangerously turning a blind eye to reality. Moreover, the administration's irresponsible climate-change policies are tarnishing the nation's reputation and standing abroad. They contradict an established global climate consensus and create a global leadership vacuum. China and other nations are only too happy to fill that void — with highly uncertain consequences.

Finally, the Trump administration's approach to climate change runs afoul of core American values, as reflected in the attitudes and statements of our nation's Founders. Thus, for example, James Madison observed that "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty," and that "a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives," and Thomas Jefferson urged his contemporaries to "preach ... a crusade against ignorance."

Putting America's head in the sand with respect to the disagreeable reality of climate change moves us ever further from the still-pertinent insights of our bold and courageous Founders.

President Trump may have begun to learn the differences between the red-meat rhetoric of political campaigning and the complexities and nuances of governance. Let's hope he also soon recognizes the folly of his initial policies on climate change. If not, they are destined to do profound harm to the American people, and to billions of others far beyond our nation's borders.