

OPINION

TIM ECHOLS

Why exiting the Paris Accord makes sense

As an elected regulator, I live every day in a world of energy and the environment. But there's another important e-word in a red state like Georgia that has to be part of the equation—"economics." My colleagues at the Public Service Commission and I seek to harmonize our energy supply with existing and anticipated environmental regulations, with a keen eye to the harsh reality of economics and how all of these affect doing business in our state. The likely negative economic impact to the U.S. is at the core of why so many voters on both sides of the aisle object to the Paris Accord.

For those who don't follow global politics, the Paris Accord, known also as COP 21, was officially the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris, France, in late 2015. UN conferences operate on a consensus-based decision making model—as opposed to a majority-rule system.

While this might sound ideal, I have seen first-hand how smaller, less developed countries are bullied into submission at UN-sponsored events.

The conference that brokered the Paris Accord, from which President Trump just announced the U.S.'s eventual withdrawal, occurred during the Obama Administration and was heavily attended by U.S. delegates who supported the president and his climate policies, including the Clean Power Plan. Republicans like me, who could have attended, sat out the event because we knew our voice would be muted.

At the time, I joked that if I been in Paris for the event, I would have needed a security detail for fear that my conservative ideas would spark a riot. That would not be the case today as Nikki Haley, the president's ambassador to the United Nations, would be front and center and appoint much of the U.S. delegation.

The Paris Accord is just one of many UN conferences on various topics that seek to control policies in participating countries. In this case, the Paris agenda can best be described as the decarbonization of the economy, a familiar theme globally in recent years. The Kyoto Protocol was an early version of the Paris agreement, adopted in Kyoto, Japan, on Dec. 11, 1997, and entered into in 2005.

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Echols serves as vice-chair for the Georgia Public Service Commission.

But like all the recent UN-driven climate events, CO2 is enemy Number 1. Cap-and-trade and a carbon tax are two ways to limit CO2 and other greenhouse gas emissions. But for many fiscally-responsible Americans, the cost of these policies provides too little benefit.

I liken it to a scuba-diving expedition where we spend \$700 on boat and tank rentals in order to pick up four quarters off the ocean floor. The costs far outweighs the benefits.

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Fortunately for us, our current policies in the U.S. are bringing about a steady decrease in greenhouse gas emissions already. Those emissions, in fact, are down 17 percent since 2005, representing a reduction in CO2 of 700 million tons.

"Carbon" has been a perennial controversial political football in the U.S. starting with the aforementioned infamous "cap-and-trade" legislation President Obama proposed back in the 111th Congress in 2009. With it dying in the U.S. Senate after passing the then-Democratically-controlled House, President Obama

eventually used an agency to put forward the Clean Power Plan via the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

That plan is now tied up in the courts with President Trump promising it will never see the light of day. The Paris Accord, originally pushed by the U.S. and especially Germany, echoes those familiar Obama themes of decarbonization.

Others have proposed an outright price on carbon, which is essentially a new tax on the economy in general. But that would be bad news for the U.S., as a Heritage Foundation study revealed that carbon pricing does little to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and aid the environment. It harms American manufacturing competitiveness, creates a new revenue stream based on behavior modification, and impacts low-income Americans disproportionately.

In Georgia, our renewable energy policy has made us one of the fastest-growing solar states in the nation—without a subsidy and without a mandated Renewable Energy Portfolio.

Our greenhouse gas emissions are on the decline as well. Natural gas burned in power plants creates half the carbon dioxide of coal and doesn't contain the other pollutants we use scrubbers to eliminate.

Across the U.S. and in Georgia, we are experimenting with batteries, too. Large scale battery farms and extensive energy efficiency upgrades are on the rise on the West Coast and will be coming to Georgia in the next 10 years.

Finally, let's not forget the impact of low power rates. Georgia's electricity cost is 14 percent below the national average, with average power bills about one-third the price of a German power bill.

Even better, Georgia and South Carolina eliminated the sales tax on energy used in manufacturing to attract even more industry. In Georgia, the PSC froze base rates at Georgia Power for three years as a part of the merger deal between Southern Company and Atlanta Gas Light Resources. All of that is good news for power customers.

The Paris Accord is a United Nations solution to a perceived global problem. But like our country's dues to the United Nations, America is asked to contribute more than its share and that is simply not in our best interests.

We are experiencing more energy independence now that we have in a long time.

Now is not the time to allow the world to tie our hands economically so they can eliminate our competitive advantage in the global economy.

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