FOSSIL TO THE FUTURE? POST PARIS AGREEMENT – STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, ACADEMIA AND INDUSTRY LOOK TO LEAD US FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

By Candace Quinn And Ben Hutterer
On January 24, 2017, President Donald Trump issued an executive order moving forward the much-debated Keystone XL Pipeline project. We analyzed the possible effects of this executive order, both inside and outside the US, and what the future held for America’s participation in the Paris Agreement, in an article published in Energy and Mining Magazine in March of 2017. Since the article’s release, there have been significant changes throughout the energy sector, but the outlook for its future remains uncertain.

Since President Trump issued his executive order, the Keystone Pipeline has experienced renewed, intense backlash in many of the states it is slated to traverse. For instance, in Nebraska there is concern that the pipeline will interfere with electrical transmission lines. In other states, spills and environmental contamination are highly publicized issues. US District Court Judge James Boasberg ruled that the US Army Corps of Engineers didn’t consider the environmental impact of construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (another pipeline that was approved earlier this year). The impact study will have to be redone, with a status conference around this scheduled for the week of June 25. Unfavorable findings on these issues could have an extreme impact on the future of the United States energy sector.

In addition to new environmental concerns, the President has chosen to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, a commitment by over 195 signatory countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The agreement is widely considered to be demonstration of intent by the United Nations’ member countries to promote alternative and renewable energy and to decrease carbon emissions globally. By the United States withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, the country has communicated interest in increasing the use of fossil fuels and continuing to make fossil fuels the center of its energy policy. This puts the US in a precarious position, not only in relation to the UN, but also internally as many cities, states, industries and members of academia have publically stated that they support the Paris Agreement. In fact, after the President’s press conference about the withdrawal, city and state officials across the country, including Bill Peduto, Mayor of Pittsburgh, and Bill De Blasio, Mayor of New York City, have begun to take steps to continue reducing greenhouse gas production. Both Mr. Peduto and Mr. De Blasio have since signed executive orders to have their cities comply with the Paris Agreement. Governor Brown reaffirmed California’s commitment to exceed the targets of the Clean Power Plan and the State’s efforts to curb pollution, which are the most ambitious carbon reduction targets in North America. This relatively local action has made it difficult to say authoritatively what the outcome of the US’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will ultimately mean.

Perhaps the only thing that hasn’t changed since our March article is the uncertainty surrounding the future of US energy sector. How will the US proceed in seeking new arrangements to address climate concerns, while remaining in the UN Framework Conventions on Climate Change? Will the US stay involved, both on behalf of its economic interests and to bring solutions to the global effort? Will the US seek to reform the UN Climate Framework toward approaches more responsive to the countries interests? Cooperative approaches are the best way to address the challenges of energy access, climate change and sustainable development. Within the US, are we creating fair trade, and truly promoting competition? Will the renewable energy sector still be able to compete? Will consumer trends be swayed? These are some of the many unknowns that make this time and the energy sector both exciting and disconcerting.

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