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Exclusive: At U.N. climate talks, Trump team plans sideshow on coal

Timothy Gardner

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The Trump administration plans to set up a side-event promoting fossil fuels at the annual U.N. climate talks next month, repeating a strategy that infuriated global-warming activists during last year's talks, according to three people with knowledge of the matter.

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FILE PHOTO: U.S. President Donald Trump refers to amounts of temperature change as he announces his decision that the United States will withdraw from the landmark Paris Climate Agreement, in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, U.S., June 1, 2017. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque/File Photo

As with the 2017 gathering in Bonn, Germany, the administration plans to highlight the benefits of technologies that more efficiently burn fuels including coal, the sources said.

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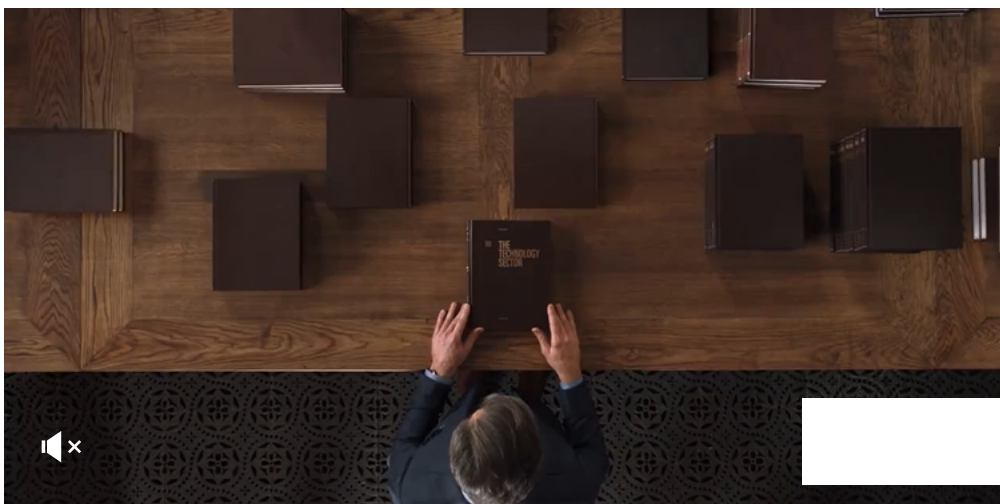
This year's talks in Katowice, Poland - located in a mining region that is among the most polluted in Europe - are intended to hammer out a rule book to the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change, which set a sweeping goal of ending the fossil-fuel era this century by spurring a trillion-dollar transition to cleaner energy sources such as solar and wind power.

Even as the Trump administration aims to promote energy strategies that could detract from those international goals, it also plans to let State Department officials continue negotiating the climate accord - a recognition that the next U.S. president may drop the nation's opposition to the pact.

"The White House seems to have taken the view that it's important to let technocrats complete the work of the rule book. It's in the U.S. national interest to be at the table and see an outcome that emphasizes transparency, holds countries accountable," said one of the sources, who is familiar with State Department plans.

The White House and the State Department did not respond to requests for comment.

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The United States, the world's top oil and gas producer, is the only country to have announced its intention to formally withdraw from the Paris accord.

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The administration's resistance has come against a backdrop of increasingly urgent warnings from scientists about the threats posed by greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels. The panel will come less than two months after the U.N.'s

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned in a report that the world's use of coal for generating power will need to be nearly eliminated by mid-century – to between 1 and 7 percent of the global mix, from around 40 percent now – to help prevent deadly droughts, storms and floods brought on by climate change.

“Quite frankly, the U.S. is the only party to the convention that appears to be willing to push a rational discussion on the role of cleaner, more efficient fossil (fuels) and the role of civilian nuclear energy,” said one of the sources, who is involved in the planning of the event for Katowice, likely to be held on Dec. 10.

The source, who did not want to be named due to the sensitive nature of the issue, said the event will be dominated by proponents of coal and natural gas and likely advanced nuclear power, too. The panel will also likely feature a U.S. Energy Department representative. At this point plans do not include a renewable power industry representative, the source said.

The event is expected to be led by Wells Griffith, Trump's international energy and climate adviser, the sources added. Griffith's main energy policy experience involves a year at a political job at the Department of Energy and helping to set up a deal last year to supply Ukraine with U.S. coal after the country lost control of mines to Russian-backed separatists.

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Trump last year announced his intent to leave the Paris agreement, calling it harmful to the U.S. economy and casting doubt on the climate science underpinning the accord.

As per U.N. rules, Trump's administration will not be able to leave the pact until a day after the 2020 presidential election, and U.S. officials recognize that finishing the rule book and making sure developing countries such as China are held to verifiable emissions cuts are in the national interest.

Last year, the fossil fuels event set up by the White House drew widespread protest and condemnation from climate activists. Former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg wrote on Twitter that “Promoting coal at a climate summit is like promoting tobacco at a cancer summit.”

At the same time, 40 career officials from the State Department and other agencies continued their work on the Paris pact's rule book. U.S. envoys to the Bonn talks were viewed by their counterparts as constructive and helpful, feeding hopes that the United States could eventually be drawn back into the accord, a possibility that Trump has held

open.

But much has changed since last year.

Several Trump administration officials who supported keeping the United States in the Paris pact, although under different terms, have left the administration. They include top economic adviser Gary Cohn, national security adviser H.R. McMaster, and climate and energy adviser George David Banks. Now, economic adviser Larry Kudlow and national security adviser John Bolton are opponents of the Paris agreement, and Banks has been replaced by Griffith.

Ex-CIA director Mike Pompeo, a vocal critic of efforts to combat global warming by past U.S. administrations, has become Secretary of State, replacing former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who supported U.S. participation in the Paris agreement.

That places Trump's team more squarely behind his "energy dominance" agenda of boosting U.S. fossil fuel output and exports, in part by promoting low-emission technology for fossil fuels to other nations.

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The Energy Department has touted technologies including small scale "modular" coal plants that could burn the fuel more efficiently and step in when clouds and calm weather limit solar and wind power.

Environmentalists should not get excited that any State Department cooperation in Poland signals the Trump administration is eyeing a return to the Paris agreement, one of the sources said.

"It's making sure U.S. interests are paramount, nothing more, nothing less."

Reporting by Timothy Gardner; Editing by Richard Valdmanis and Brian Thevenot

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