

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
George P. Nassos

The Paris Agreement Became Law on November 4, 2016. Now What?

In November 2015, over 200 nations met in Paris at COP21 to discuss how the world can mitigate global warming and be sure that the atmospheric temperature does not increase by more than 2° C. from pre-industrial levels, but preferably by no more than 1.5°C. During the past year, over 195 nations including the United States ratified the Paris Agreement and made it legal as of November 4, 2016. The agreement was open for signatures in April 2016, and six months later it was signed and made effective. If you recall, the Kyoto Protocol was written in 1997 but really wasn't agreed upon for almost eight years primarily because the U.S. wouldn't ratify it until China and India had some skin in the game. Almost everyone is now realizing that this environmental issue is so critical that action must be taken.

The primary goals of the Paris Agreement are to hold the increase in the global average temperature to less than 2° C. from pre-industrial levels, but also achieve net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions beginning in 2050. Each country has made a pledge to reduce carbon emissions commensurate with its rate of emissions along with its technical ability. For instance, the U.S. has committed to reducing emissions 26 – 28% below 2005 levels by 2025. To achieve these goals, the public and private sectors must act boldly and quickly to reduce the use of fossil fuels and increase renewables as quickly as possible. In addition, if the technology can be developed, sequestering more carbon from the atmosphere would really enhance the goals of the agreement.

For the Paris Agreement to be successful, all of these countries, particularly the developed countries, must make the necessary investments in educating the masses, adopting renewable energy, reducing the use of fossil fuels, and developing carbon capture technology. But this will take a major financial commitment. For that reason, COP22 took place the week of November 7, 2016 in Marrakech, Morocco to take action on the Paris Agreement including obtaining financial commitments from each of the countries and to establish plans for tracking progress by each country. This is all good; however, none of these laws is binding.

The first global meeting to discuss climate change took place in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. And what has happened during these past 24 years? Really, nothing. It was about that time when James Hansen brought this environmental problem to the attention of the U.S. government, and he said we cannot exceed 350 ppm of greenhouse gas emissions. We have not only exceeded that level but we are now over 400 ppm, and there is no known way today to reduce that concentration. We are still talking about curtailing this major environmental problem

Although President Obama did very little in his early years of eight years in office, he is now doing considerably more to curtail GHG emissions. He did as much as possible during his second term to secure a worldwide climate deal that would have an impact without requiring approval by the U.S. senate since the laws are not binding. Keep in mind that the Senate is controlled by the Republicans who tried not to cooperate with the president. Now that Donald Trump has been elected the 45th President of the United States, he has stated that he will cancel the Paris Agreement and pull the United States out of it. Fortunately, no country can undo the agreement for three years and it wouldn't take effect for another year after that – a total of four years. Trump has also stated that he would undo all of Obama's executive actions to fight climate change.

After almost 25 years of working on curbing climate changes, we have almost arrived at a plan to do something about it – the Paris Agreement. And now, with a new U.S. president this may be all for naught. I believe that Donald Trump has such a huge ego that he will surround himself with the brightest people in order to be a success. Hopefully, some of these people will convince him that climate change is for real, and it is more important than the impact of the energy lobby on Congress. If he truly wants to do what is best for the all of the American people and the rest of the world, he will change his tune and fight climate change. We'll see.