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Birds search for food on trash collected by a log boom on a river in Klang, Malaysia, June 5, W

Birds search for food on trash collected by a log boom on a river in Klang, Malaysia, June 5, World Environment Day. (CNS/Reuters/Lim Huey Teng)



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The outcome of elections in the United States on Nov. 3 will ripple far beyond the country's borders, affecting action on climate change around the world, activists say.

Most immediately, U.S. participation in the Paris Agreement on climate change, the 2015 accord that set targets for greenhouse gas reduction, is in the balance. President Donald Trump withdrew the country from that agreement, a decision that takes effect on Nov. 4, the day after the election.

"The timing couldn't be more symbolic," said the Rev. Fletcher Harper, executive director of GreenFaith and a leader in the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, both multi-faith organizations dedicated to environmental and climate issues.

If Trump is reelected, the decision to pull out of the Paris Agreement will be locked in for the next four years. Democratic challenger and former Vice President Joe Biden has already said that if he is elected, the U.S. will return to the agreement — a process that would take effect 30 days after notifying the United Nations of the intent to rejoin.

Biden would face a bigger challenge, however, in reinstating many of the more than 100 environmental regulations that Trump has rolled back by executive order.

But more than the Paris Agreement is at stake for the global environment, activists say. The Trump administration's official disdain for climate science has shifted investment priorities, undermined public trust in science and encouraged autocratic leaders elsewhere who are inclined to erode environmental protection measures.

"If President Trump is reelected, it will send a further signal to the world that the world's supposedly strongest democracy is embracing an increasingly lawless and authoritarian style of governance and government," Harper told EarthBeat." And that will only embolden leaders such as [President Jair] Bolsonaro in Brazil and right-wing populist leaders elsewhere, who are no friends of tropical forests."

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Those leaders tend to be more lenient toward industrial agriculture and extractive industries such as mining and oil and gas, he said. Deforestation in Brazil has increased since Bolsonaro took office on a platform backed by the country's agribusiness lobby, known as *ruralistas*. The increased forest loss has been exacerbated this year as the coronavirus pandemic has hampered enforcement of environmental regulations.

"Those governments are much more likely to disregard or fail to enforce existing environmental and human rights protections," Harper said of right-wing regimes like Bolsonaro's. "So a victory for President Trump would mean that that style of economic activity would be validated in an extraordinarily destructive way."

Globally, agriculture is the second-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, after energy generation. Destruction of forests to make way for cattle ranching or crops like soybeans and corn is one of the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions in tropical forest countries including Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia.

Tropical forest loss has increased since the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change and now accounts for about 8% of carbon dioxide emissions, according to a 2018 study. That means that if tropical forests were a country, it would be the world's third-largest emitter, just after the United States. The U.S. was historically the largest greenhouse gas emitter, until China surpassed it in 2006.

The destruction of tropical forests has a cascade effect, not only releasing greenhouse gases, but also reducing the biodiversity that keeps ecosystems healthy, said Thomas Lovejoy, a biology professor at George Mason University in Virginia who has spent his life studying tropical ecosystems.

A section of the Amazon jungle burns as it is cleared by farmers in Rio Pardo, Brazil, Sept. 15.

A section of the Amazon jungle burns as it is cleared by farmers in Rio Pardo, Brazil, Sept. 15. (CNS/Reuters/Ricardo Moraes)

"The biodiversity crisis and the climate crisis actually are all part of one big Gordian knot of environmental challenge," Lovejoy said during an NCR-EarthBeat Facebook Live presentation on Sept. 30. "The destruction of nature, which is generating so many endangered species and potential extinctions, is also contributing to excess [carbon dioxide] in the atmosphere."

That is bringing the planet "pretty close" to a tipping point at which "ecosystems start to come apart," he said. "So this is the moment to either have a sustainable future — build for one — or get into a downward spiral, which could be very messy for ourselves as well as the rest of life on Earth."

The Trump administration's refusal to play a leading role in addressing climate change has frustrated activists around the world.

In Asia, conservation groups and others working on climate issues were alarmed that the U.S. was able to change course so quickly after Trump's 2016 election and that other presidents, like Bolsonaro, followed suit, said Nana Firman, Muslim outreach coordinator for GreenFaith, an international, multi-faith environmental movement.

"People suddenly think, 'Is this a trend?' How come suddenly we have leadership that doesn't [place a] priority on the environment and the climate crisis?" she said. "I think that's a shock to a lot of people – just to come to the [Paris] agreement took so long, and you can just topple it in one day."

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Firman said that in her native Indonesia, after Trump took office, people working on climate-related projects that received U.S. funding had to change the wording of proposals and reports to eliminate references to climate change. And throughout Asia, she added, countries are looking more to China than to the U.S. for leadership now.

Nevertheless, climate change is becoming more firmly entrenched as a global political priority, Firman said.

"Other countries have started to take the environment and climate seriously in elections," she said. "Before it's always [been] a sideline. Now it's becoming an issue that [candidates] discuss."

In Africa, Trump's "America first" policies and the lower U.S. profile in the international climate arena have already had a strong impact that would be aggravated by a second term, said Meryne Warah, GreenFaith's global coordinator, who is based in Nairobi, Kenya.

"For me, the U.S. election is like a grenade that is being held with the pin out, that if it is dropped it could explode at any time, or a bomb waiting to go off," Warah told EarthBeat.

"If Trump wins, that would be very sad for Africa, because it comes with a lot of implications, a lot of consequences in terms of what it would mean in implementation of the Paris Agreement," she said. "There are dire implications in terms of climate financing. There are also dire implications in terms of the bilateral discussions and resolutions" stemming from international climate negotiations, and how they would be implemented in Africa.

As in Asia, U.S. funding for environmental projects in Africa under the Trump administration shifted away from being directly connected with climate change, Warah said.

Africa is already one of the regions suffering most from climate change, with droughts and floods displacing millions of people. But U.S. funding no longer prioritizes actions aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, helping countries adapt to climate change or addressing climate-related damage and losses due to

extreme weather, she said.

A person cleans up flood damage Jan. 3, following heavy rains in Jakarta, Indonesia. (CNS/Reu

A person cleans up flood damage Jan. 3, following heavy rains in Jakarta, Indonesia. (CNS/Reuters/Antara Foto/Dhemas Reviyanto)

Instead, one of the new areas stressed is "climate-induced migration," she said. Projects receiving that kind of funding focus more on migration patterns, social conflict and strengthening porous national borders, rather than on reducing the emissions that cause climate change in the first place.

"Porous borders have nothing to do with climate change impact. They have nothing to do with the disruptors of air quality. They have nothing to do with forest protection. They have nothing to with marine plastic pollution," Warah said.

Trump also suspended in 2017 U.S. contributions to the Green Climate Fund, a global program meant to help less-industrialized countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. Such cuts in funding affect the ability of African countries to shift away from oil and gas to renewable energy, Warah said.

The impact could be broader if other countries are unwilling to take the political risk of opposing the U.S. on climate policy, she added.

"Everybody wants to make nice with America. Nobody wants to be in an antagonistic position with America," she said, adding that countries negotiating trade deals with the U.S. might not resist if U.S. officials tied those accords to acceptance of policies related to use of fossil fuels, for example.

While the impact of a second Trump term would be global, it would resonate especially in Latin America, said Moema Miranda, the Brazilian secretary of the Churches and Mining Network, a coalition of religious and environmental organizations.

She worries that Trump is bolstering a trend toward more authoritarian leaders like Brazil's Bolsonaro. And she sees Brazil's president following Trump's lead in undermining science and science-related government agencies in a country that traditionally has been a regional leader in scientific research.

Miranda hopes a Biden administration would counter Bolsonaro's influence and force him to backpedal on some of those policies.

Demonstrators join the People's Climate March in Washington to protest President Donald Tru

Demonstrators join the People's Climate March in Washington to protest President Donald Trump's stance on the environment April 29, 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Theiler)

For Central America, climate change is closely intertwined with U.S. immigration policy, said Rita Grajeda, an adviser to the Archdiocese of Guatemala's human rights office, which is part of the Churches and Mining network.

In Guatemala, landslides caused by severe storms "affect people who already live in poverty and who find themselves even more vulnerable," she said. Some head north to the U.S. in search of economic opportunities.

Prolonged drought has also driven people from Honduras and El Salvador, sometimes in caravans that picked up more migrants as they traveled through Guatemala and Mexico. While the U.S. stepped up deportation of recent arrivals during the Obama administration, that stance has hardened under Trump, she said.

In Central America, indigenous communities are most affected by the impacts of transnational mining or energy companies, said Grajeda, who said the U.S. should hold companies working abroad to the same standards that would apply to them at home.

If Biden is elected as president, restoring the U.S. environmental regulations the Trump administration has unraveled could take years, experts say.

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"The United States has spent four years going backwards fast," Harper said. "And that's time that's lost that can't be regained."

Lovejoy sees three priorities for a potential Biden administration in addressing climate change.

An immediate return of the U.S. to the Paris Agreement would "send a climate signal and get us back into the international arena," he said. That, he added, should be

followed by a review of the measures the Trump administration has rolled back, to determine which should be reinstated immediately and, if necessary, reinforced.

"But I think the third one is the big one," Lovejoy said, "which is to convene enough policymakers and scientists and experts to decide [how] the United States can really engage with other countries and international leadership on these global-scale environmental challenges."

Even if Biden wins the White House, however, flipping the Senate would be crucial for enacting future environmental legislation. Former President Barack Obama implemented many climate policies by executive order because climate legislation stalled in a divided Congress after Democrats lost control of the Senate in 2010, two years into his first presidential term.

Trump, in turn, has rolled back many of those policies by executive orders — many of which now face court challenges. If Biden wins, the administration is unlikely to fight those challenges in court.

Members of Mexico's National Guard hold their shields to block migrants in Ciudad Hidalgo, p

Members of Mexico's National Guard hold their shields to block migrants in Ciudad Hidalgo, part of a caravan traveling to the United States near the border between Guatemala and Mexico in January. Hundreds of Central American migrants waded across the Suchiate River into southern Mexico in a new test of U.S. President Donald Trump's Central America strategy to keep them away from the U.S. border. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Torres)

If the Democrats win the White House and regain control of the Senate, climate policy is more likely to be legislated, rather than ordered by executive decree.

Meanwhile, Lovejoy noted, despite the lack of federal government action, city and state governments and some corporations have been moving ahead with policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

As a result, he said, "The United States is not that far off from where it would have been if it had been following the commitments made in the Paris Agreement. Is that enough? Of course not. But it gives us a reasonable base to really ramp up from."

In contrast, another four years for the Trump administration would mean a grim outlook for global climate policy and a challenge for people of faith, said Harper, of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

"I think if President Trump wins the election, the U.S. will exit the Paris Agreement and will continue to pursue extraordinarily regressive climate policies that will be genocidal in their impact," he said. "And religious groups will be faced with, from our perspective, the absolute moral and spiritual obligation to escalate our resistance to the reckless approach that the current administration is taking towards the future of the planet."

Farmland is seen in Mwanba, Congo, June 25, 2015. The Congo River basin spans six African c

Farmland is seen in Mwanba, Congo, June 25, 2015. The Congo River basin spans six African countries where forests are cleared for subsistence agriculture, large-scale farming and illegal logging. (CNS/Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services/Michael Stulman)

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.