

A photograph of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, illuminated at night. The tower's intricate lattice structure is lit up with warm yellow lights, contrasting against the dark blue night sky. The tower is the central focus of the background image.

# WHAT YOU — NEED TO — KNOW ABOUT THE PARIS AGREEMENT

# FACTSHEET:

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When a record-breaking 175 nations signed the Paris Agreement at the UN ceremony on April 22, Earth Day 2016 officially became one for the history books.

But with a whole bunch of technical and official-sounding terms flying around, it's not always immediately clear what exactly is happening or why. Here's how to answer common questions your friends – on the internet or IRL – are probably asking about what's going on.

# 1. IN ONE SENTENCE – WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?



On April 22 – Earth Day – the Paris Agreement became one step closer to having legal effect around the world, as the 195 countries that adopted the agreement in December began signing it – and 175 signing in person at a special UN ceremony.

## 2. WAIT – I THOUGHT THE AGREEMENT WAS SIGNED IN DECEMBER. WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?



The Paris Agreement was *adopted* in December, meaning 195 countries agreed on its contents and a final draft. It was then translated into all six official UN languages and announced clerical errors were fixed. This final version must now be *signed* by countries, who then *ratify* it according to their own domestic procedures.

### 3. WHICH COUNTRIES HAVE ALREADY COMMITTED TO SIGNING? ARE THE LARGEST GREENHOUSE GAS EMITTERS (LIKE THE US, CHINA, INDIA, AND THE EU) ON BOARD?



On April 22, [175 countries](#) signed the Paris Agreement, which set the record for **highest number of countries signing an international agreement on its opening day**. This includes the US and China, who jointly announced that they would sign on Earth Day, and nations including India and Australia have followed suit. [Click here to see an up-to-date list of all the countries that have signed on since April 22.](#)

It's not only important that these major emitters are signing on, but also that they've put their commitments on the table. China, for example, [pledged among other things](#) to peak its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions around 2030 – and according to some analyses looks like it will achieve that goal [much earlier](#) than expected. The country will also launch a [national cap-and-trade program](#) in 2017. Meanwhile, China's pledge to increase non-fossil fuels to around 20 percent of its primary energy consumption by 2030 commits it to installing 800–1,000 gigawatts (GW) of zero-emission facilities, roughly [equal to the size](#) of the entire current US electricity grid.

The US, for its part, pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions [26—28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025](#). India aims to install [175 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2022](#) – nearly as much as the [US has today](#) (~183 GW).

By making these commitments public, China, India, and the US sent a clear message to other nations around the world: the shift to clean energy is on – and it's time to get on board.

## 4. WHAT HAPPENS ONCE THESE 150-PLUS COUNTRIES SIGN THE AGREEMENT ON APRIL 22?



Countries who have not done so already can sign the agreement from now to April 21, 2017 (Article 20.1). After signing, countries have to officially approve the agreement at home, and each will have its own process for doing so. Some of those processes can happen quickly, as we'll see with the US. Others, such as the EU's with its 28 member states, will take considerably longer, even years. There is no deadline for domestic approval.

According to Article 21.1 of the Paris Agreement, the agreement enters into force 30 days after the date on which at least 55 Parties (the UN's name for countries signing the document) accounting for at least an estimated 55 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have ratified it and submitted that ratification to the UN.

## 5. DOES CONGRESS HAVE TO APPROVE THE AGREEMENT FOR THE US TO IMPLEMENT IT?



The Paris Agreement, like most international agreements, will not need the advice and consent of two-thirds of the US Senate to go into force. In very general terms, this is because the agreement does not legally bind the US to any new commitments that it does not already perform under the UNFCCC (an international climate treaty signed and ratified by the US in 1992), such as fulfilling requirements to monitor and report on GHG emissions. Plus, US obligations under the agreement don't alter existing statutes or [require new, implementing legislation](#). The agreement is therefore treated as an “executive agreement” and all the US must do is have a representative of the president deposit an instrument of acceptance with the UN Secretary-General. That said, it could be difficult for the US to meet its obligations under the Paris Agreement if the Supreme Court were to overturn the US EPA's Clean Power Plan.

This does not mean that the US does not have to take any action under the Paris Agreement. For example, all Parties must submit new commitments and review their progress as part of a process known as a “global stocktake” every five years, among other actions.

## 6. WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE 1.5-DEGREE CELSIUS GOAL? WILL THE PARIS AGREEMENT HELP PREVENT THE EARTH FROM WARMING OVER 2 DEGREES C?



Scientists generally consider (and politicians agree) that we have to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures to keep small, low-lying islands and coastal areas free from the worst effects of climate change. For small island nations, 1.5 degrees may be the highest temperature rise under which they can continue to exist without being swallowed by rising seas. In fact, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) negotiating group has adopted the phrase “[1.5 to stay alive](#)” as its motto. AOSIS was joined by the Climate Vulnerable Forum, led by the Philippines in Paris, in calling for a 1.5-degree C temperature goal in the Paris Agreement in the [Manila-Paris Declaration](#). Others followed suit.

At the other end, politicians have agreed that 2 degrees C is the upper end of acceptable temperature rise if we’re going to limit the the adverse effects of climate change. That’s why the Paris Agreement has an objective of holding global temperature increases “well below” 2 degrees C above pre-industrial levels and “to pursue efforts” to limit this increase to 1.5 degrees. That’s important because we’re very, very close to those limits already. February 2016 was the warmest month on record, by a lot. [According to two US scientific agencies](#), the Earth’s surface temperature was 1.21 degrees C above the twentieth-century average.



To keep warming from exceeding 2 degrees C, the Paris Agreement essentially sets out a long-term goal of peaking global GHG emissions as soon as possible, rapidly reducing them thereafter, and continuing to reduce them until we reach net zero emissions in the second half of this century (Article 4.1). The agreement sets this goal based on science, [which says](#) that to have greater than a 66 percent chance of keeping warming below 2 degrees, we have to reach net zero emissions between 2080—2090, (or between 2095—2100 to have greater than a 50 percent chance).

The same science also says that if we want to have greater than 50 percent chance of keeping warming below 1.5 degrees, we need to reach net zero between 2060—2080. In other words, the sooner we peak emissions and the faster we reduce them, the better chance we have!

The problem is that even if we fully implement the current commitments that countries have submitted, it wouldn't keep warming under 2 degrees. One commonly cited study has calculated a [2.7-degree C rise](#) under the current scenario. So countries need to do more at every level – and they need to do it soon. The current commitments on the table need to get much more ambitious before the Paris Agreement goes into effect. Countries can, however, adjust their commitments to be more ambitious at any time (Article 4.11).

## 7. WHAT DOES THE AGREEMENT SAY ABOUT SOLAR POWER AND RENEWABLE ENERGY?



Energy receives nearly no direct mentions in the Paris Agreement, but behind the curtain of policy, the truth is clear: in order to implement the agreement, the world must make a rapid, equitable, and just transition to large-scale deployment of renewable energy. For this reason, [NGO groups](#), the [Climate Vulnerable Forum](#), and more have made reaching 100-percent renewable energy by 2050 a priority target. Studies have [shown this is possible](#), if we act now and act fast. And with the cost of renewables continuing to plummet year after year, the good news is that doing so is increasingly affordable and practical.

## 8. WHAT ROLE DO BUSINESSES AND CORPORATIONS PLAY (IF AT ALL)?



Businesses and the private sector have a large role to play, though again you wouldn't know it by reading the text of the agreement. But they're stakeholders too, and many have made commitments to action on climate change and formed groups such as [We Mean Business](#) to support each other.

Among other critical contributions that businesses can make is in shifting their financial support from high-carbon projects and infrastructure to sustainable initiatives backed by massive clean energy investments. And the best part is that it's good business! Numerous [reports](#) and studies have shown that it's a fantastic business opportunity to embrace sustainable and low-carbon approaches now while respective markets are still maturing, opportunities are open, and costs are lower rather than later.

## 9. WHAT CAN I DO TO ENCOURAGE MY COUNTRY TO JOIN IN?



### WHEN OVER 175 NATIONS SIGN THE PARIS AGREEMENT, IT'S PROOF THAT PROGRESS IS POSSIBLE.

Shout your support for climate action!

[Add your name and thank world leaders for fighting climate change.](#)

Then, use the power of your social networks to spread the word and inspire others to speak up for action on climate change. Click the buttons below to share on social media or by email.

