

Background Information on Fossil Fuel Industry Climate Science Deception

For nearly three decades fossil fuel companies have knowingly worked to distort climate science findings, deceive the public, and block our needed transition to a clean energy economy. This backgrounder is adapted from the Union of Concerned Scientists' "[Climate Deception Dossiers](#)," which contain excerpts from 85 internal company and trade association documents ([Mulvey and Shulman](#)), and other public sources.

Fossil Fuel Companies Have Known About the Science of Global Warming For Decades

- **1988: An Important Milestone in Public Recognition of Climate Change:** There is ample evidence that fossil fuel companies have known for decades about the robust scientific evidence of the risks associated with the continued burning of their products. In 1988, NASA testified before Congress that scientific data had confirmed humans' role in climate change. Also in 1988 the United Nations formed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the U.S. Congress introduced the National Energy Policy Act of 1988 in an effort to reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases.
- **Industry Task Force Acknowledges Dangers and Causes of a Warming World:** From 1979-1983, the American Petroleum Institute (API), the nation's largest oil trade association, organized regular meetings of a CO2 task force to review and discuss the current climate change science and its implications. The committee included representatives of Amoco, Exxon, Mobil, Phillips, Shell, Sohio, Sunoco, Texaco, as well as Standard Oil and Gulf Oil (the last three of which would later merge to become Chevron). The meeting minutes show that member companies were aware of the scientific evidence that global warming would occur due to the burning of fossil fuels. By the year 2067, a backgrounder predicted, warming from CO2 emissions would have "globally catastrophic effects." ([Inside Climate News A](#)).
- **Fossil Fuel Company Coalition Acknowledges Climate Change:** In 1989, the Global Climate Coalition was formed, including members from BP, Chevron, Exxon, Mobil, Shell, and others. Internally, the members acknowledged that human caused climate change was real. One passage of a 1995 primer prepared by their scientific advisors reads, "*The scientific basis for the Greenhouse Effect and the potential impact of human emissions of greenhouse gases such as CO2 on climate is well established and cannot be denied.*" (Bernstein, 1995, emphasis added).

The Industry Chose a Course of Denial and Deception

- **Industry Misinformation and Deception Strategy:** The fossil fuel industry—like the tobacco industry before it—is noteworthy for its use of active, intentional disinformation and deception to maintain its lucrative profits. Fossil fuel companies have intentionally spread climate disinformation for decades. Internal documents dating back to the early 1990s show a series of carefully planned campaigns of deception organized by companies and by trade groups representing the industry.
- **Exxon CEO's Public Statements Denying Climate Change:** Despite the recognition by scientists—including Exxon's own—of the contribution of fossil fuels to climate change, CEO Lee Raymond stated publicly in 1996, "Currently, the scientific evidence is inconclusive as to whether human activities are having a significant effect on the global climate." ([Inside Climate News B](#)) In 1997, he told the World Petroleum Congress that global warming was not occurring, and that even if it were, oil and gas would have nothing to do with it ([Heartland](#)).
- **American Petroleum Institute's "Roadmap" Memo to Fuel Uncertainty:** A 1998 internal strategy memo from the American Petroleum Institute outlined the fossil fuel industry's plan to use scientists as spokespeople for the industry's view. The innocuously titled "Global Climate Science Communications Plan," written with the direct involvement of fossil fuel companies including ExxonMobil (then Exxon) and Chevron, details a plan for dealing with climate change that explicitly aimed to confuse and misinform the public. According to the memo, "victory" would

be achieved for the campaign when “average citizens” and the media were convinced of “uncertainties” in climate science despite overwhelming evidence of the impact of human-caused global warming and nearly unanimous agreement about it in the scientific community.

measurements will be taken at one or more of your to-be-designated locations as the point is implemented.

Victory Will Be Achieved When

- Average citizens “understand” (recognize) uncertainties in climate science; recognition of uncertainties becomes part of the “conventional wisdom”
- Media “understands” (recognizes) uncertainties in climate science.
- Media coverage reflects balance on climate science and recognition of the validity of viewpoints that challenge the current “conventional wisdom”
- Industry senior leadership understands uncertainties in climate science, making them stronger ambassadors to those who shape climate policy
- Those promoting the Kyoto treaty on the basis of extant science appear to be out of touch with reality.

Current Reality

Unless “climate change” becomes a non-issue, meaning that the Kyoto proposal is defeated and there are no further initiatives to thwart the threat of climate change, there may be no moment when we can declare victory for our efforts. It will be necessary to establish measurements for the science effort to track progress toward achieving the goal and strategic success.

The American Petroleum Institute—whose member companies include BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Shell—made a plan to declare “victory” by manufacturing uncertainty about climate science, as evidenced by a leaked 1998 strategy memo.

- **Fossil Fuel Companies Funded Dr. Wei-Hock Soon’s Contrarian Research:** From 2001-2012, Dr. Wei Hock-Soon received over \$1.2 million from ExxonMobil, the American Petroleum Institute, the Charles Koch Foundation, and other fossil fuel interests for his contrarian climate science research. Although Soon’s research methodology and conclusions have been widely criticized and discredited by his scientific peers, politicians and interest groups backed by the fossil fuel industry have promoted Soon’s work for years to spread doubt about the role of human-caused emissions in climate change.

As fossil fuel companies’ efforts to deceive the public become known, the time is ripe to hold these companies accountable for their actions and the harm they have caused. Over the past several decades, the public has made it clear on issues such as tobacco, asbestos, and lead that companies can be held liable when they fail to acknowledge and address the known negative impacts of their products on human health and well-being. Climate change is no different. Fossil fuel companies must accept responsibility for their heat-trapping emissions, halt their use of deceptive tactics to block policies designed to speed the transition to a low-carbon energy system, and pay their fair share of the costs of harms caused by their products.

Sources

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