Fossil fuel firms are still bankrolling climate denial lobby groups

The oil giant BP has announced that they will no longer fund the American Legislative Exchange Council (Alec), a lobbying group that routinely
misrepresents climate science to US state legislators. It is the latest sign that some of the world’s largest fossil fuel companies appear to be warming to the overwhelming evidence that the unabated use of their products poses severe risks of disrupting the climate.

Last month, BP and Royal Dutch Shell announced their support for shareholder resolutions calling on them to commit to reduce heat-trapping emissions, invest in renewable energy, and show how their current business model would hold up against the strict limits on future emissions needed to limit the risk of major climate disruption.

Shell chief executive Ben van Buerden recently stated that “climate change is real and a threat we want to act upon. We are not aligning with sceptics.”

Even ExxonMobil, which spent $16m (£11m) between 1998 and 2005 to fund groups that spread disinformation about climate science, now prominently acknowledges on their website that “rising greenhouse gas emissions pose significant risks to society and ecosystems.”

But appearances can be deceiving.

For one, BP still channels funds through its political action committee to climate science-denying US policymakers such as senator James Inhofe, chair of the senate’s environment and public works committee. While such direct contributions to politicians are a matter of public record, companies continue to sow climate doubt and influence climate policy in ways that are far more opaque.

For instance, recently released documents show that ExxonMobil gave more than $75,000 between 2008 and 2010 to secretly support the work of Willie Soon, a contrarian climate researcher at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, well after the company announced it would halt such funding. Soon’s research has sought to downplay the human influence on global warming.
This follows revelations that Southern Company, one of the largest utilities in the US, spent $400,000 between 2006 and 2015 to fund Soon, supporting his research, Congressional testimony, and other “deliverables” while specifying...
that its funding be disclosed only with express company permission.

Robert Gehri, the Southern Company employee who authorised this funding was one of a dozen industry representatives who, on behalf of the American Petroleum Institute, created a \textit{\$6m campaign in 1998 that misled the public about climate science}. Among other strategies, he oversaw the covert funding of “independent” scientists.

Some of the largest fossil fuel companies now publicly accepting mainstream climate science, continue to support climate denial through influential lobbying groups and trade associations. Shell, Chevron, and ExxonMobil still fund Alec, which misleadingly describes climate change as “a historical phenomenon for which debate will continue over the significance of natural and [human-caused] contributions.”

With their support, Alec promotes “model legislation” to repeal state renewable energy standards and roll back other climate and energy policies.

Shell, BP, Chevron, and ExxonMobil are also members and funders of the API and the Western States Petroleum Association (WSPA). Late last year, a \textit{leaked presentation from WSPA} revealed a stealth campaign to block climate policies in California by backing a constellation of astroturf groups with names such as the “California Drivers Alliance” and “Californians Against Higher Taxes”.

Exactly how much fossil fuel companies have spent to support disinformation remains shrouded in secrecy, in part because they are not required to report their political and public relations spending. Robert Brulle, a social scientist at Drexel University, estimates that \textit{hundreds of millions of dollars} have flowed from corporations, ideological foundations, and groups that oppose climate policy and often sow doubt about mainstream climate science.

Such spending is big money in politics, but it pales in comparison to the staggering costs of climate change. New York City alone estimates it will cost nearly \$20bn over a decade to protect its citizens against rising seas and more extreme weather. The bipartisan \textit{Risky Business Project} estimates that over the next 15 years, sea-level rise and storm surge are expected to increase damage from East and Gulf Coast storms by \$2bn to \$3.5bn. They also conclude that more extreme heat could cause corn, wheat, soy and cotton yields to decline 10% or more in some southern and midwestern counties.

Who will pay these and other costs of preparing for now inevitable changes? Right now, by default, this responsibility falls largely to taxpayers.
But shouldn't fossil fuel companies bear some responsibility to pay for the harms resulting from their products?

Tobacco companies were found liable for damage from cigarettes. Those companies also deceived the public about the realities of scientific research on smoking. In fact, they funded some of the same scientists and groups fossil fuel companies have relied on to spread misinformation. The tobacco companies were held accountable, in part, because they colluded to deceive the public and policymakers about the risks their products caused.

Similarly, after scientific evidence on the cancer-causing risks of asbestos was established, producers of asbestos and manufacturers of products containing it were also held liable for damages.

The magnitude of the fossil energy industry's contribution to the climate problem is enormous. Researchers have found that just 90 entities - including the world's largest investor-owned fossil fuel companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, BP, and Shell - are responsible for extracting the coal, oil, and gas that have produced about two-thirds of all industrial carbon pollution. For decades, these same companies have sought to obscure the risks of using their products, and sought to deny and delay regulation - increasing the risks society faces from a changing climate.

It is not too late for fossil fuel companies to take responsible action. Shell and BP's support for shareholder resolutions calling on them to invest in low-carbon energy is a first step. But investors - and society at large - should expect far more.

We should expect fossil fuel companies to stop supporting climate disinformation and distance themselves publicly from trade associations and lobbying groups that do. We should expect them to make their political spending transparent. And we should expect them to pay a fair share of the costs of limiting the damages from climate change, which a more expedited transition to low carbon economy could have - and should have - avoided.

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These reckless criminals should be prosecuted for crimes against humanity.

The global warming theory supporters are the Lysenkos of our day, both in the pseudo-scientific status of their ideas, and in their advocacy of suppressing dissent.

Did you peer review that statement or get Nigel to dictate it for you?

the Smithsonian took half the money and signed the contracts... so why the emphasis on 'Soon'?

so why the emphasis on 'Soon'?  

Deflectors on full, from a WUWT contributor no less.

This may or may not be true, but it certainly is not relevant.

so why the emphasis on 'Soon'?
Soon wrote the papers, and liaised directly with his funders regarding the content of those papers. Soon failed to disclose the potential conflict of interest to his publishers.