



Submitted Testimony of

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to the

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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on

Fueling the Climate Crisis: Examining Big Oil's Climate Pledges

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Public Citizen is a non-profit organization with more than 500,000 members and supporters nationwide. We represent the public interest through legislative and administrative advocacy, litigation, research, and public education on a broad range of issues.

My name is Tracey Lewis, and I am the Climate and Energy Policy Counsel at Public Citizen and a fellow at the Climate & Community Project, which works to connect the climate justice movement to the policy development process.

I would like to discuss the human impacts of climate disinformation, particularly on low wealth communities and communities of color, and some proposals for how we address these problems.

At least 45 years ago, oil industry scientists [privately warned their own company executives](#) that their products would spell doom for the planet. They warned executives that continued burning of fossil fuels would lead to possible catastrophe from the greenhouse effect.

At the 1977 meeting, the Exxon scientists laid out a doomsday scenario where average global temperatures would increase between two and three degrees celsius. Weather patterns would be altered, increasing rain in some places and turning other places into deserts.

Yet, instead of taking action, the fossil fuel industry has used its political power and public messaging capabilities to [undercut climate policymaking and climate action](#), mislead the public about its products, and cause well-documented harms.

What is becoming clear is that disinformation is a key tool in maintaining the status quo. [For example the 2009 email hacking scandal disrupted](#) the Copenhagen COP, which could have been a pivotal moment of international progress on climate that would have put us years ahead of where we are today.

We have witnessed disinformation campaigns like BP's promise to go "[Beyond Petroleum](#)." Years later, after no serious moves toward that goal, the company's Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, killing 11 rig workers, countless birds, dolphins and other wildlife due to 130 million gallons of oil spilled into the gulf. More than [10 years later](#), the Gulf is still in recovery, and the people who worked on the cleanup report a [host](#) of [health problems](#).

Faced with incontrovertible evidence of a warming planet, oil companies are now changing their public messages about climate change, moving away from outright denial of climate change and asserting that they seek to be part of the solution.

Even ExxonMobil, long the [most aggressive promoter](#) of climate denial, has pivoted to [claiming](#) it cares about climate change. The company made this shift amid intense pressure from shareholders, who recently [unseated company board members](#) on the basis that the company's near-exclusive focus on oil and gas is a poor long-term business choice.

Industry Climate Pledges are Just Climate Disinformation & Greenwashing

According to [ExxonKnew](#), there are 4 ways to evaluate how fossil fuel companies use climate pledges to greenwash their actions:

1. They exclude most of their total emissions – and shift responsibility to consumers.
2. They rely on false solutions like carbon capture/carbon sequestration.
3. Their targets cover only a portion of their business operations.
4. They promise to become more efficient polluters.

[ExxonKnews](#) cites a recent [FTC complaint](#) against Chevron for its deceptive advertising practices, namely the deceptive use of emissions intensity metrics, which misled consumers about the company's commitments to climate and environmental action.

The latest industry tactic is to emphasize carbon capture and storage [schemes](#) – an expensive, energy-intensive and unproven technology that [has repeatedly failed](#) to deliver, despite substantial government support.

Although carbon capture has a record of near complete failure, Congress has been [debating](#) whether to increase federal tax credits designed to support this technology, and the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress last year [included](#) more than \$12 billion for carbon capture technology and \$9 billion for “[hydrogen hubs](#)” that would largely benefit incumbent fossil fuel companies while doing little to produce clean energy.

Stanford University engineering professor Mark Jacobson's [criticism](#) of these possible expenditures is apt:

Any legislation funding carbon capture and storage or use or direct air capture is legalizing the funding of scam technologies that merely increase air pollution death and illness, mining and its damage, and fossil-fuel infrastructure, and they have no provable carbon benefit. By far, the best thing to do with the subsidy money for this is to purchase wind, solar, and storage to eliminate fossil fuels.

Consequences of Failure to Take Meaningful Action

There are real consequences to giving the fossil fuel industry a pass for its continued climate disinformation, and the harms go well beyond the escalating climate crisis.

Air pollution from burning fossil fuels harms people's respiratory, cardiovascular, reproductive and neurological health. Living within 10 miles of a refinery increases risk of all cancers. A recent Harvard study calculates that air pollution from burning fossil fuels is also responsible for a staggering [1 in 5 deaths globally](#).

Here in the United States, the deadly health impacts from fossil fuels fall principally on Black and frontline communities. According to the 2017 joint NAACP & Clean Air Task Force [report](#), “[o]il and natural gas production, processing, and transmission and storage facilities are built near or currently exist within a half-mile of over one million African Americans, exposing them to an elevated risk of cancer due to air toxic emissions.”

There are 91 counties across the U.S. that are building oil refineries or where refineries exist close to more than 6.7 million African Americans, or 14 percent of the African American population, disproportionately exposing them to toxic and hazardous emissions such as benzene, sulfur dioxide, and formaldehyde.

The Industry Must Be Held Accountable for Its Deception and the Harms It Has Caused—and Continues to Cause

What we are seeing is a continuation of the falsehoods of the 70s, 80s, and 90s—but now wrapped in another new bow.

Uncovering the deceptions of the fossil fuel industry is an essential part of understanding protecting our country from the worst effects of the climate crisis. For too long, these companies have deceived the public in an effort to stop anyone from putting a halt to their destructive and deadly practices. It is past time we uncover the full extent of their deceptions, hold them accountable, and rapidly deploy safe, clean sources of energy for the full economy.