

How We Must Move Forward as a Campus this Earth Month

Op-ed

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Key climate change indicators have reached record levels - again. Global temperatures have hit historic highs, sea levels are rising, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and intense, with significant economic and health impacts projected for the future. 2024 was the hottest year yet; the Global Mean Surface Temperature (GMST) was approximately 1.55 degrees celsius warmer than the pre-industrial average. Of greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide levels reached ~420 parts per million (ppm), or 151% of pre-industrial levels; methane reached ~1923 parts per billion (ppb), or 266% of pre-industrial levels; and nitrous oxide reached 335.8 ppb, or 124% of pre-industrial levels. Ocean warming creates coral bleaching and rising sea levels. The long-term rate of sea-level rise has increased from 2.1 mm per year between 1993 and 2002 to 4.7 mm per year between 2015 and 2024. Despite this seemingly low number, it can be detrimental to coastal cities [1]. All this to say: the climate is rapidly deteriorating and on track to become uninhabitable for humans. Not to stray too much into climate doom, but this is serious.

At the same time, the federal government is cutting Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations. The US withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement. Previously protected lands in Alaska have been opened for drilling and mineral extraction. Not only have jobs been cut in the EPA, but also in the Office of Research and Development, Interior Department, Department of Energy, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which consists of leading climate researchers and scientists. In March, a House of Representatives committee announced an attempt to amend the Endangered Species Act [2]. Approvals for wind farms on public lands and federal waters have been stopped, with threats to do the same on private land. An energy emergency has been declared, allowing a fast-track of the construction of oil and gas projects [3]. With these legislative decisions, the powerful continue to choose that fighting climate change is not only unimportant, but a threat to their ever expanding wealth.

The theme of Earth Day this year is “Our Power, Our Planet”, emphasizing the power of collective action. This planet is *ours*, not the property of the rich guys that make decisions. Since those in power have decided against the needs of the majority in protecting our planet, it is up to us to take action. And not the performative action and empty promises we see from corporations and administrations alike (see [Coca-Cola’s climate pledge](#)), but tangible change toward a better world. Pledges move from 2030 to 2040, and 1% of revenue to help the planet to 0.1%. Let’s face it: these oligarchs are not saving us, and they will never decide to help the planet if it works against their capital.

In the face of failure to protect the Earth, LMU must be a leader in mitigating climate change. We have invested resources to do so, like a sustainability office that led LMU to a number 12 green ranking by the Princeton Review, thriving academic programs focused on environmental causes, a responsible investment program, and a commitment to fully divest from

fossil fuels by 2030 [4, 5, 6]. However, is this enough? LMU tends to commit to sustainability to get their name on lists and rankings, win awards, and receive recognition to market their values towards student applicants, rather than leading change for the sake of the planet. Due to this misguided intent, we often fail to create lasting, material impacts. For example, LMU competes in *Campus Race to Zero Waste's* RecycleMania annually, and we consistently put up big numbers. The competition started in 2001, and we have won five national championships since then, including back to back W's in 2022 and 2023 in the three major categories: Food Organics, Diversion, and Per Capita [7]. LMU's great recycling infrastructure is immensely beneficial, but our numbers are inflated because of LMU's ridiculous plastic usage. If LMU banned single use plastic bottles, we would reduce waste by significant margins and decrease our carbon footprint substantially, making a tangible difference in the face of climate change. But then we would have a harder time winning our annual recycling competition.

Further, the LMU administration committed to a responsible investment policy in Spring 2019 and divestment from fossil fuels in Fall 2022 but refuse to disclose where our financial assets are invested [8]. If we are making these promises, shouldn't we show our community where the ~\$745 million endowment is going [9]? Moreover, a responsible investment committee was created along with the policy, but the people on this committee are not granted voting power on endowment decisions, just the ability to provide recommendations.

If LMU truly wants to commit to "igniting a better world", we must take legitimate actions for the survival of the planet. And we can! Other universities across the United States have made significant policy decisions, which were previously deemed "unrealistic" or "impractical", to curb their carbon footprints. The University of California system achieved fossil free investment portfolios in 2020 [10]. In 2014, Georgetown reduced their carbon footprint by over 71% through energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy installations; they also reached their goal of cutting 50% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 - 6 years early [11]. USC banned single use plastic bottles in July 2022 and saved one million bottles from waste by November [12]. These schools are not much different from LMU. In fact, as California or Jesuit schools, they share many of the same values and environments. LMU can follow their lead, replicate each of these significant changes, and then keep improving, setting a positive example for more schools to do the same, truly embracing 'the service of faith and promotion of justice' while fighting for the survival of the planet. This Earth month, let's use our power for the sake of our planet!

References

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