

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Big Oil, Big Tobacco, Big Lies

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Published Date: 12:34 AM October 12, 2015

Section: opinion

Word Count: 744

Content:

BOSTON—Over the last few years, a growing number of people have been taking a hard look at what is happening to our planet—historic droughts, rising sea levels, massive floods—and acknowledging, finally, that human activity is propelling rapid climate change. But guess what? Exxon (now ExxonMobil) had an inkling of this as early as 1978.

By the early 1980s, Exxon scientists had much more than an inkling. They not only understood the science behind climate change, but also recognized the company's own outsize role in driving the phenomenon. Recognizing the potential effects as "catastrophic" for a significant portion of the population, they urged Exxon's top executives to take action. Instead, the executives buried the truth.

There may be a silver lining to this infuriating story: The recent investigation that exposed Exxon's deceit could end up catalyzing the action needed to address the looming climate crisis. After all, similar revelations about the tobacco industry—what the major cigarette companies knew and when they knew it—transformed the public health landscape.

In 1996, a series of lawsuits forced tobacco companies to release millions of internal documents, which confirmed what public health advocates and policymakers had long suspected: As early as the 1950s the industry knew that nicotine was addictive and that cigarettes caused cancer. But to protect its own interests, Big Tobacco deliberately misled the public, doing everything possible to cast doubt on scientific findings that it knew to be accurate. Such tactics enabled the industry to delay, for more than 50 years, regulation that could have saved millions of lives annually.

After the revelations, however, it was clear that the tobacco industry was a malevolent force that did not belong in the policymaking process. With Big Tobacco out of the picture, and armed with evidence of the real effects of tobacco consumption, health advocates were finally able to compel their governments to act.

Big Oil, it is now clear, has been following Big Tobacco's playbook. In 1997, almost two decades after it began studying climate change, it quashed its research, claiming that climate science was "far from clear," and thus it did not "support mandated cuts in energy use."

Beyond suppressing its own findings, ExxonMobil (and its peers) funded and promoted junk science and attacked scientists who warned of the impending climate disaster. The fossil-fuel companies' approach was so effective that the media are only now beginning to recognize the leading role the industry played in creating—almost out of whole cloth—the so-called "climate debate."

But perhaps Big Oil's biggest success was diminishing the political will to implement appropriate regulation. Even after the international community adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, the fossil-fuel industry managed to block meaningful progress—to the point that, if serious action is not taken soon, the entire process could unravel.

In Europe, Royal Dutch Shell's lobbying so diluted the European Union's efforts that there are now no binding targets for renewables or energy efficiency for individual countries. The company even sent a letter to the European Commission's president claiming that "gas is good for Europe." Shell and other oil companies are now promising to work as "advisers" to national governments on how to deal with climate change.

Just as the tobacco files drove the tobacco industry out of policymaking processes, the Exxon investigation should compel world leaders to eliminate the fossil-fuel industry from efforts to solve the climate crisis. After all, no policy can succeed if those who shape it are betting on its failure.

The turning point for tobacco-related public health policy came when the industry's depravity became indisputable. Now, that moment has come for the climate movement. We cannot simply hope that the fossil-fuel industry will change its ways. As an alliance of human rights groups, environmental activists, and corporate-accountability advocates already is demanding, we must kick the industry out of the policymaking process altogether.

Exxon's scientists were right: the effects of climate change on many communities are catastrophic. With so many lives at stake—and such clear evidence of the threat—Big Oil, like Big Tobacco before it, should be treated for what it is: Big Trouble. Project Syndicate

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