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VIEWPOINTS

California physicians: Fossil fuel companies must pay for climate damages | Opinion

By **Cynthia Haq** and **Brenda Nuyen** *Special to The Sacramento Bee*

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Firefighters battle the Franklin Fire next to a business along Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu in December. Wally Skalij *Los Angeles Times/TNS*

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for years to come.

As physicians working in California’s medical community, we recognize that extreme weather events — a key component of human-driven climate change — cause significant harm to human health. We believe that fossil fuel companies must pay their fair share for damages and prevention, and the Polluters Pay Climate Superfund Act would do just that.

OPINION

Senate Bill 684 authored by state Sen. Caroline Menjivar, D-Van Nuys, and Assembly Bill 1243, authored by Assemblymember Dawn Addis, D-San Luis Obispo, [would require fossil fuel companies to pay](#) for “the damage caused by greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere” between 1990 and 2024. The California Environmental Protection Agency would be tasked with calculating and assessing the damages among the responsible parties.

The increased frequency, intensity and scope of wildfire damage have resulted in widespread adverse health effects. Respiratory diseases, including asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiovascular disease, as well as mental health disorders, are associated with [acute smoke exposure](#) and fire trauma, particularly among young people.

Efforts by fossil fuel producers to slow progress in addressing climate change put more lives at risk. January’s devastating wildfires spread smoke particles that wafted hundreds of miles from the burn area. This particulate pollution is especially dangerous for children under the age of 5 and pregnant women.

For decades, fossil fuel producers (coal, oil and gas) denied that their products contribute to climate change. These companies are now directly linked to worsening forest fires across the western United States. The U.S. National Academy of Sciences reports that increases in temperatures and vapor pressure deficits (or aridity) [due to human-caused climate change](#) have doubled the risk of wildfire activity in the

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emissions [traced to the world's 88 largest fossil fuel producers](#) and cement manufacturers.

Fossil fuel industries have deployed lobbyists, public relations teams and their own researchers to create doubt about the dangers of fossil fuels while claiming that clean energy sources weren't viable alternatives. Many oil industry leaders still claim that burning fossil fuels doesn't contribute to climate change. The oil and gas industry are using many of the same strategies the tobacco industry used to create doubt to keep their inherently destructive products on the market. Such actions are a betrayal to the public.

Scientists working for the oil industries knew [as early as the '50s](#) that climate impacts from burning fossil fuels would be catastrophic. These companies have also known that fossil fuels produce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas pollution that warms the planet and subsequently intensifies weather extremes. According to Zero Carbon Analytics, there are 50 lawsuits in the United States filed against the world's largest oil, gas and coal producing corporations seeking compensation for climate damages, misleading advertising claims and emission reductions.

There should be consequences for companies that knowingly supply products that have directly contributed to immeasurable environmental and public health harms. The facts are indisputable: burning fossil fuels is a leading contributor to air pollution, the changing climate, the illnesses and deaths they cause.

We urge the industry to do more to transition to clean energy sources to mitigate the significant harms their products have caused. As physicians, we are speaking up to prevent climate-related illnesses and deaths. We encourage concerned citizens to join us by urging their legislators to support the Climate Superfund Act. It's time for the oil industry to "do no more harm."

Dr. Cynthia L. Haq is a board-certified UC Irvine Health family medicine physician who also served as chair and professor in the UC Irvine School of Medicine's Department of Family Medicine. Brenda Nuyen is a comprehensive

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