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Chevron Evades Questions About its History of Climate Disinformation

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On May 29, I joined Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) at the annual Chevron shareholder meeting in San Ramon, California. There, I asked the company's CEO, Michael Wirth, about

Chevron's past and present promotion of climate disinformation.

Documents continue to be uncovered showing the internal knowledge fossil fuel companies had of the harm their products would do to global climate. Two reports in particular — one from [Exxon in 1982](#) and another from [Shell in 1988](#) — stand out for their detailed predictions of global warming and its consequences.

Chevron Knew About “Globally Catastrophic Effects”

Although ExxonMobil has received the most attention for its early knowledge of climate science (spawning the hashtag #ExxonKnew), the entire petroleum industry knew its products would cause global warming.

In 1959, the physicist Edward Teller warned the industry about global warming in a keynote address. In 1965, the President of the American Petroleum Institute (API) followed with a warning of his own.

By 1968, the API was commissioning scientists to write private reports assessing the problem, and by the end of the 1970s, the trade association had established a committee to monitor climate science. That committee was warned of “globally catastrophic effects” by the middle of the 21st century if fossil fuel production continued to expand. Chevron’s precursor companies were members of the API and had this information.

Industry Disinformation Campaign

Despite knowing that its products had dangerous side effects, the industry didn’t warn the government or the public.

And when, in the late 1980s, governments around the world began proposing policies to avert climate change by reducing fossil fuel use, fossil fuel interests coordinated with each other to form the Global Climate Coalition, which spread disinformation about climate science and blocked climate policies for over a decade.

Chevron’s precursors, including Texaco and Unocal, were members of the Global



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Climate Coalition, along with industry-wide trade associations such as the API. Chevron and other fossil fuel producers knew their products would cause the climate change damages we're now experiencing, such as sea level rise, drought, and flooding. First, these companies failed to warn the public despite studying the problem privately. Then, they actively denied the problem, [spread disinformation](#), and blocked attempts to prevent the damage -- practices Chevron and its peers [continue to this day](#).

Lawsuits Against Chevron and Other Fossil Fuel Companies

That brings us to lawsuits. A [variety](#) of cities, states, and private groups — including New York City, Rhode Island, and the [Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations](#) — are bringing suits against fossil fuel companies in order to be compensated for climate-related damages resulting from the industry's products and corporate behavior.

Chevron is a defendant in at least [eight](#) of these suits so far, and more are being filed regularly. These lawsuits expose fossil fuel producers — and their shareholders — to significant liability risks.

My question for Michael Wirth, Chevron's CEO, was simple: How will the company protect shareholders from its own history of disinformation?

His answer was part avoidance and part additional disinformation. Wirth stated, without rationale, that the growing number of lawsuits facing the company won't help to address global warming (a claim the plaintiffs presumably disagree with). He then went on to tell shareholders that the suits bring “no new science” and “no new evidence” to the table.

Both claims are false. Attribution science — the epidemiology of climate change — is central to these lawsuits and can causally [link Chevron's products](#) to damages

from global warming.

Additionally, historical researchers continue to uncover more and more evidence of industry knowledge, denial, and malfeasance. These two prongs — science and history — proved devastating to Big Tobacco in American courts, and Big Oil may be next. That’s likely why fossil fuel producers are now seeking legal [immunity](#) from climate lawsuits in exchange for a small carbon tax.

Chevron’s CEO might be misinformed about these lawsuits. Or he might be lying to shareholders. Either way, it’s not a good look for Chevron.

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