

Written Testimony of Jamie Raskin, Ranking Member, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability

Senate Budget Committee

Hearing on “Denial, Disinformation, and Doublespeak: Big Oil’s Evolving Efforts to Avoid Accountability for Climate Change

May 1, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Committee.

In 2019, we called a hearing in the House Oversight Committee on *what* the oil and gas companies knew about climate change and *when* they knew it.

Former industry scientists and academic experts testified that the companies knew that the burning of fossil fuels caused climate change as early as 1959, the year the first Barbie Doll appeared in the United States and the year Alaska and Hawaii were admitted to the Union. In the 1960s, the science of global warming was well understood by Big Oil.

Instead of telling the world about the perils of global warming and working to change their business model, the companies suppressed relevant scientific findings for decades and came to challenge and contradict urgent calls by scientists to take climate change seriously as a global threat. As the experts told us, this pattern of lying and evasion set the country back decades in our ability to seriously address and manage climate change.

For three years, the House Oversight Committee has investigated Big Oil’s decades-long deception campaign. On September 16, 2021, we launched our investigation and sent letters to Exxon, BP, Shell, Chevron, the American Petroleum Institute, and the Chamber of Commerce. Just yesterday, in conjunction with your Committee—the Senate Budget Committee—we released our final report detailing our findings.

Our investigation uncovered compelling evidence of aggressive industry deceit which continues to this day. The joint report and documents we discovered show how, time and again, the biggest oil and gas corporations say one thing for the purposes of public consumption but do something completely different to protect their profits. Company officials will admit the terrifying reality of their business model behind closed doors but say something entirely different, false and soothing to the public.

Our investigation reveals Big Oil’s denial, disinformation, and doublespeak—all in service of their campaign to deceive the public about the enormous climate crisis we are in and the role that Big Oil has played in bringing it about. The fossil fuel companies:

- Made public pledges to support the Paris Agreement and to achieve net zero emissions while internally recognizing that their actual practices would never allow them to achieve these goals;
- Mutated from simply *denying* climate science to *spreading* disinformation about the safety of natural gas and pure propaganda about their corporate commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions;
- Publicly broadcast and promoted their interest in low-carbon technologies such as carbon capture and algae-based biofuels while internally acknowledging that those pie-in-the-sky technologies are expensive, difficult to scale, and simply not ready for commercial development;
- Relied on trade associations to spread their misleading narratives to the public and to lobby against effective climate public policy action; and
- Cultivated partnerships with academic institutions to enhance their credibility, influence and leverage research agendas and results, and bolster access to policymakers.

For example, even though BP’s website states that it supports the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement, our investigation uncovered an email revealing that BP cavalierly dismissed the meaning of the Paris Agreement, stating that, “no one is committed to anything, other than to stay in the game.” So instead of BP choosing to take the actual steps needed to reduce its enormous contribution to carbon pollution, BP is instead, “staying in the game” by continuing to promote their oil and gas products to the detriment of our climate system.

Spinning a fairy tale about their commitment to renewable energy alternatives, fossil fuel companies have often advertised their commitment to low-carbon technologies, such as Exxon’s vaunted algae biofuels program. From 2009 to 2023, Exxon spent nearly half as much on *advertising* algae as a climate solution as it spent on actually *researching and developing* it. Our investigation revealed that Exxon’s own employees raised concerns that the ads might mistakenly imply that, “the technology is live today.” It was never live—and Exxon ended up pulling up stakes on the whole project before it ever had the chance to produce any energy.

When you compare their actual investments in low-carbon technologies to their overall capital expenditures, you see exactly what kind of priority this is for Big Oil. Shell, for example, spent just 11% of its total capital expenditures on lower-carbon technologies—and Exxon and Chevron spent even less at 6% and 4%, respectively.

We learned all of these facts *despite* the companies setting up huge roadblocks to our investigation. In response to the Oversight Committee’s initial letters in 2021, the companies only provided trivial and publicly available documents. So we sent subpoenas.

Even after being subpoenaed, the companies continued to block and impede our investigation, ignoring longstanding congressional practices and norms. The companies heavily redacted or withheld entire documents based on erroneous privilege claims despite repeated objections. More than 4,000 documents came back significantly redacted.

Big Oil also used a “paper blizzard” tactic by intentionally producing hundreds of thousands of generic and non-responsive documents. Of the more than 280,000 documents produced, more than 125,000—*nearly half*—were mass emails, newsletters, flyers, and otherwise meaningless fluff documents.

If the companies had fully complied in good faith, who knows what else we might have uncovered?

During this investigation, I have been struck by the parallels between Big Oil’s aggressive denialism about climate change and the tobacco industry’s suppression of the truth about tobacco addiction and the carcinogenic effects of smoking.

More than 20 years ago, the Department of Justice brought a precedent-setting case against the cigarette companies. That case liberated our minds from the tyranny of Big Tobacco and reverberated across America and the world. As a result, the public learned about the massive disinformation campaign waged by the tobacco industry; the companies were ordered to cease and desist their propaganda and to start telling the truth to the public; and governments and people around the world used the facts uncovered to battle the tobacco industry effectively for financial restitution and defense of the public health. As a result of the sweeping political, social and legal effort to hold the tobacco industry accountable, rates of cigarette smoking have plummeted, particularly among young people, and rates of cancer, emphysema and other lung diseases have fallen. Since the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement in 1998, cigarette smoking rates among high schoolers have fallen from 35% to less than 4% in 2021. Just insisting upon the truth about tobacco use has saved literally millions of lives.

We are beginning to see comparable efforts to hold Big Oil accountable for a similar corporate industrial sabotage of truth and accountability. Today, state Attorneys General across the country, along with dozens of municipalities and tribal governments, have brought lawsuits against the oil and gas companies and their trade associations to recover huge public damages caused by injuries made possible by their decades of lying to the public about their product and its effects on our environment.

After seeing the findings of our investigation, I'm convinced that a society-wide challenge will be necessary for us to hold Big Oil accountable for profiting for decades from carbon-fueled climate change while systematically deceiving the public about its causes and its perils.

Every person in America and on Earth has a vested interest in addressing our climate emergency today. Scientific research shows that the result of 1.5°C of warming will be more extreme heat waves, massive flooding, record drought, recurring food scarcity, and dramatic sea level rise.

My watery home state of Maryland, with more than 7,100 miles of coastline, is strikingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and the rising sea level. For example, Anne Arundel County, where our state capital is, faces potential damage of more than \$4.1 billion to its public infrastructure if sea level rises by just five feet. This figure just scratches the surface of the statewide monetary costs of the climate crisis.

In his acclaimed book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond studied the collapse of human societies in history. He identified five factors that affect societal collapse—three of which tie back to the environment. The first is climate change, the second environmental degradation, and the third, the political inability to respond effectively to environmental threats.

According to Diamond, a leading cause of a society's inability to respond to a cataclysmic environmental emergency is the capture of political and social power by a narrow subset of society, which is committed to its own profit and power rather than the common good of the whole society and therefore refuses to take the steps necessary for collective survival.

Fossil fuel companies publicly claim to be partners — if not leaders — in fashioning climate solutions, but our investigation exposed those claims to be false and deceptive. Big Oil is not addressing the climate crisis but is rather profiting from it and using a lot of its mammoth resources to insulate its carbon-based business model.

Big Oil's campaign of deception and distraction undermines the efforts we need to mobilize our people and government to save our climate, our habitat, and our species. Unless the deception ends, and until the industry is held accountable, we are unlikely ever to be able to muster the national political will to effectively tackle climate change.

We have been undermined at every turn by the carbon industry, a specific subset of society in the corporate sector which has, amazingly, been trying for more than a half-century to suppress the truth about how carbon emissions destabilize the climate and what we need to do to protect ourselves from climate calamity.

Now is the time for us to pull back the curtain and see the truth. And that truth will give us a second chance to save our climate, our society, and our species.