

Follow the money: Why climate change scepticism still exists

It's official. After teeter-tottering for nearly a month, US President Donald Trump has finally announced that the country will withdraw from the Paris Agreement. This makes it the only developed nation to not support the agreement.

While world leaders are criticising the US for backing out of the deal, there is also vocal support from conservative groups and individuals. To some, they believe that climate change doesn't exist or is nothuman-caused. Mr. Trump himself has claimed that it is a Chinese hoax.

Climate change scepticism isn't uniquely American however. Even Australia and the UK have their fair share of denial. At a time where the science is settled and the world needs to drastically cut carbon emissions, how is there such a strong countermovement?

In early December 2015 – while representatives from around the world have gathered in Paris to reach the climate agreement – an undercover investigation by Greenpeace USA revealed evidence of fossil fuel companies paying academics from famous US universities, like Princeton and Penn State, to spread scepticism over climate science.

Also last year in February, a scientist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, Willie Soon, was exposed for accepting donations from fossil fuel companies – without disclosing a conflict of interest – to write papers that deny the risks of climate change.

Leaked email correspondence shows that these academics-for-hire can get paid US\$6,000 for every op-ed they write, or US\$15,000 for a paper that is not peer-reviewed through proper channels. Rather than putting money directly into their pockets, companies hide their funding trails by donating to think tanks that these academics are part of or through proxy funding organisations like the Donors Trust.

A 2013 study looking into the US climate change counter-movement found that over US\$900 million is spent annually to sow doubt and confusion over climate change. A UK-based non-profit organisation, InfluenceMap, has found that the five major fossil fuel companies alone spend almost US\$115 million annually to obstruct climate policy directly in the United States.

What they are doing now right is pretty much taken straight out of the tobacco industry's playbook back in 1950s with trying to confound links between smoking and lung cancer – funding research to instil doubt, criticising other studies as “junk”, lobbying for less regulation, and introducing “safer” products (clean coal, anyone?).

Another parallel between the two is that both industries knew long ago about the risks that their products carry.

In 2015, InsideClimate News published its eight-month long investigation “Exxon: The Road Not Taken” , unveiling ExxonMobil’ s knowledge and recognition that fossil fuels do contribute to global warming as far back since late 1970s – before most of us even knew what “climate change” meant or worried about environmental issues.

Rather than taking this rare opportunity to lead the decarbonisation of the global economy and move into renewable energy, ExxonMobil decided to backtrack and spread misinformation instead. Now, the FBI is evaluating on whether or not the company has violated US federal laws for misleading the public on climate change

Even with the recent revelations or more evidence supporting anthropogenic climate change, it is unlikely that the countermovement will falter. The US exiting the Paris Agreement is tragic, but it isn’ t the end of the world either. California, New York and other major US cities have already declared they will uphold the agreement – with or without the federal government.

In anticipation to the decision, nations like China and Russia have reaffirmed their climate commitments. French President Emmanuel Macron responded by calling out to others to “make our planet great again” .

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