

Position on Fossil Fuel Divestment
Columbia University Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing (ACSRI)
Submitted to President Bollinger and the University Trustees, November 12, 2020

This document explains the ACSRI's position on fossil fuel divestment, and why we have made our current proposal rather than supporting full fossil fuel divestment or taking no action.

As an important point of clarification, Columbia's endowment currently has no direct public holdings in fossil fuel companies. Divestment therefore relates to any *future* investments in this sector.

Why the ACSRI recommends taking action on fossil fuels:

Climate change is a man-made crisis and its complexity requires a coordinated response. Columbia must join other segments of society in confronting this crisis and use every tool at its disposal, including divestment or threat of divestment, to encourage companies to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and address the urgency of climate change.

Fossil fuels are the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. Science is clear that greenhouse gas emissions resulting from human activity (anthropogenic emissions) are the primary cause of climate change. In 2017, 76% of the United States' anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions came from burning fossil fuels for energy.¹

Many fossil fuel companies have been "bad actors". Whether directly or through trade associations, many fossil fuel companies at one point or another have lobbied against the science of climate change, an area in which Columbia has dedicated significant resources and is a respected, academic leader.

Columbia's actions have great symbolic value. By virtue of Columbia's size and academic leadership, its actions and commitments are a powerful signal to the market and other stakeholders. Divestment or threat of divestment would focus further attention on fossil fuel production and climate change, potentially encouraging other investors to take similar action. At scale, such attention can help remove companies' "social license to operate" as they traditionally have, thus making it easier for governments to act appropriately on climate issues.

Columbia's investments should be aligned with its leadership in addressing climate change. Columbia is already a leader in addressing climate change through its operations and research, including the new Climate School. There is an inherent tension between supporting academic research and partnerships with others on addressing climate change, while at the same time financially benefiting from companies that contribute significantly to climate change with emissions-intensive business models.

¹ "Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2017." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), April 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/inventory-us-greenhouse-gas-emissions-and-sinks-1990-2017>

The Columbia community cares deeply about addressing climate change and supports action from Columbia's endowment. Over many years, Columbia student groups have called for fossil fuel divestment, documented in the official positions of the Columbia College Student Council.² In 2019, fossil fuel divestment was supported by over 100 Columbia faculty members.³ Moreover, the ACSRI's current review of fossil fuel divestment was triggered by the proposal of Columbia University students and a local chapter of Extinction Rebellion submitted at the end of last year. It is evident that the Columbia community cares deeply about climate change and views the endowment as an important part of the solution. As representatives of the Columbia community, the ACSRI shares this view.

Why the ACSRI does not recommend complete divestment of fossil fuel companies:

Complete divestment of the fossil fuel sector will not address the climate change problem. Divestment will not directly reduce the capital available to publicly listed fossil fuel companies, and may in fact promote the transfer of fossil fuel extraction activity to national- and state-owned companies that are more polluting, less transparent, less sensitive to societal pressures, and less committed to addressing the climate crisis.

Through complete divestment, Columbia will lose its ability to influence fossil fuel companies' management by engagement and proxy voting. This would leave shares in the hands of investors who may not share the same urgency to address the climate crisis. With many fossil fuel companies now primed for a shift in business strategy and the transition to a low-carbon economy, investors are in a unique position to influence companies' long-term plans. This influence could extend to other sectors dependent on fossil fuels, including utilities, transportation, chemicals, plastics, cement and agriculture.

Fossil fuels still serve a purpose and cannot be entirely replaced, yet. Alternatives to fossil fuels currently exist in the generation of heat and electricity by using renewable energy, but in automobile transportation the infrastructure for electric vehicles is still nascent, and for air transportation it remains experimental. Despite significant progress, Columbia and its students and faculty are still dependent on fossil fuels for a significant portion of their energy needs.⁴ However, it would be short-sighted for Columbia not to focus on reducing exposure to fossil fuels through both its operations and investments.

Fossil fuel companies are not the only major contributors to the climate crisis. Full divestment from the fossil fuel sector ignores the complexity of climate change and the significant contribution of other sectors to greenhouse gas emissions, including their demand for fossil fuels.

²<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2013/10/18/heinrich-wins-senate-seat-divestment-passes-overwhelmingly/>

³<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2019/12/04/over-100-columbia-faculty-members-sign-petition-in-support-of-divestment-from-fossil-fuels/>

⁴<https://sustainable.columbia.edu/news/columbia-university-achieves-100-zero-emissions-renewable-electricity-2018>

Why the ACSRI recommends setting criteria to permit investment in select fossil fuel companies with credible plans to transition to net zero emissions by 2050:

Investor pressure has encouraged many fossil fuel companies to transform their approach to climate science, greenhouse gas emissions, and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Alongside civil society, pressure from investors has led several large fossil fuel companies to reimagine their business model and actively support climate science, regulation and the larger transition to a low-carbon economy. Fossil fuel companies are often well capitalized, employ thousands of highly talented people, manage complex operations, and are well-recognized brands. Those resources can and should be used to proactively transition business models to a net zero emissions economy, both in terms of switching to the production of renewable energy sources and achieving net zero emissions in their remaining production of fossil fuels. For example, in 2020, Eni, one of the world's largest fossil fuel companies, announced that its oil and gas production would peak in 2025 and pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050.⁵ BP pledged to eliminate its greenhouse gases by 2050.⁶ Royal Dutch Shell and Spanish petroleum company Repsol have also set ambitions to reduce emissions and increase their investments in renewable energy.⁷ Orsted (previously named Danish Oil and Natural Gas) has committed to become the first carbon neutral utility by transitioning its business model from fossil fuels to renewable wind and solar.⁸ Equinor has committed to halve its carbon intensity by 2050 and grow its renewable energy capacity tenfold.⁹ Investment in - and active engagement with - select, climate-leading fossil fuel companies provides an opportunity to further encourage and accelerate the transition to a net zero emissions energy sector.

Columbia's endowment should support companies actively transitioning to net zero emissions. The economy's transition to net zero emissions will require trillions of dollars in capital investment and require several decades.¹⁰ Columbia can support this transition by providing capital and expertise to companies, or it can sit on the sidelines. The urgency and importance of climate change require Columbia to do everything it can to support and accelerate the transition, including investments in companies with credible plans and actions to transition the economy from fossil fuels to net-zero GHG-emitting sources of energy.

Columbia should invest in companies of the future. Nearly every sector of the economy emits greenhouse gas emissions, and all businesses must be encouraged to reach net zero emissions no later than 2050. Divesting entirely from one sector will not solve climate change. And were Columbia to divest from all sectors emitting greenhouse gas emissions, it would be left with a very small and limited investment portfolio. Instead, Columbia must invest in the companies of the future, those with credible and verifiable plans to further the economy's

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/ffa4d050-5a03-11ea-a528-dd0f971feb9c>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/02/12/1a867124-4da4-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a_story.html

⁷ <https://fortune.com/longform/bp-oil-gas-clean-energy-ceo-bernard-looney-petroleum-profits-stock/>

⁸ <https://www.fastcompany.com/90459425/how-this-danish-energy-company-is-transitioning-from-oil-and-gas-to-all-renewables>

⁹ <https://www.equinor.com/en/news/2020-02-06-climate-roadmap.html>

¹⁰ "Making Mission Possible," Energy Transitions Commission, September 2020. <https://www.energy-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Making-Mission-Possible-Full-Report.pdf>

transition to net zero emissions, initially fossil fuel companies and in the coming years expanding to all investment sectors.

We believe Columbia should use its academic leadership and financial resources to accelerate the transition to a global low-carbon economy, with the objective of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.