CONSERVATION MATTERS

CONSERVATION LAW FOUNDATION

The Dirty Truth About Greenwashing

clf

FALL 2023

The oil and gas industry want to convince the public that biofuels are clean alternatives to traditional oil and gas – but they're really just an excuse for business as usual.

THE CLIMATE "SOLUTIONS" *that aren't*

Big Oil has sold "alternative" fuels for years as a way out of our climate crisis. There's only one problem. They won't solve anything.

By: Pamela Reynolds

Peruse the website of any major oil company and you might think you'd accidentally stumbled onto CLF's website – or that of any other conservation group. Buzzwords like "renewable" and "sustainable" are plastered across the screen. Shell Oil is excited about its "energy transition." Chevron leans heavily on "renewable diesel." BP clamors over "lower-carbon energy" and "net zero by 2050."

It all seems so encouraging, indicating that, somehow, within sight is a fossil fuel-free future in which climate change has been knocked back on its heels thanks to the thoughtful, prescient planning of caring oil companies. In this narrative, Big Oil and Gas – although still reluctant to admit their role in creating our climate crisis – has resolved to do something about it.

But there's a far dirtier truth behind the environmentally aware, climate-friendly catchphrases we see flaunted in oil company marketing, and it's this: Many of the "alternative" fuels that oil companies peddle as low-carbon energy solutions don't offer us much of an alternative at all.

Instead, these "alternatives" would further shackle our energy system to fossil fuels and even greater disruption of our climate. Even "alternative" solutions like hydrogen, which involves splitting apart molecules in water to create energy, currently rely almost exclusively on fossil fuels for processing. And what we end up with, as a result, is the same old climate-changing gases in our atmosphere.

The fundamental truth is incontrovertible and has been documented in recent research: As oil and gas companies publicly vow to move away from the production of fossil fuels by embracing "biofuels," they continue, behind the scenes, to expand uses for the same dirty products. Their cynical ploy allows them to pocket billions in profits in the face of alarming climate change impacts while supposedly "fighting the good fight."

"These types of false solutions are all part of a larger subterfuge to avoid the fundamental changes to their business model that these companies need to make if we're going to cut carbon out of our energy system," says Bradley Campbell, president of Conservation Law Foundation.

The energy "solutions" posited by Big Oil and Gas are a classic illustration of a public relations tactic used most skillfully by spin master E. Bruce Harrison, says Melissa Aronczyk, co-author of "A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism," written with Maria I. Espinoza. Harrison spent his career organizing public relations campaigns opposing environmental regulations and played a crucial role in sowing doubt about the scientific consensus around global warming in the 1990s. Quoting Harrison, Aronczyk sums it up this way: "To get what you want in public and politics, you want to find consensus and compromise – or at least you want to appear to want consensus and compromise. This is the 'relations' in public relations."

The oil and gas industry clearly took his words to heart in the 1990s – and they continue to do so today.

New England is a leader in true clean energy solutions. The nation's first offshore wind farm, Deep Water Wind, was built here off the coast of Rhode Island's Block Island.

IMAGE SOURCE: Laurie O'Reilly

GREENWASHING THEIR WAY TO PROFITS

When it comes to oil company talk versus actions, studies have revealed what researchers have deemed a "mismatch between discourse, actions, and investments." There's a quick shorthand term for this lack of action: greenwashing. It's defined as the disturbing practice of dressing up in green clothing in public while, in private, counting on the same old carbon-saturated policies that allowed Big Oil to double its profits last year.

A damning 2022 study published in the journal PLOS One found that Chevron, ExxonMobil, BP, and Shell peppered recent annual reports with terms like "climate," "low-carbon," and "transition" while touting new strategies around cutting carbon. But when researchers reviewed actions taken on clean energy, they uncovered only broken promises. The companies were, unsurprisingly, financially reliant on fossil fuels. Since 1965, the study revealed, those four major oil companies have accounted for a whopping 10% of global carbon emissions.

"Frankly, it's outrageous that these companies have spent decades alternately sponsoring false narratives to undermine climate science and disingenuously spotlighting their minimal investments in clean energy to claim leadership in the transition to clean fuels," says Campbell.

ALTERNATIVE FUELS IN NEW ENGLAND OFFER FEW ACTUAL ALTERNATIVES

We can see this greenwashing in action in New England, where the fossil fuel industry is leaning hard on selling biofuels such as "renewable" natural gas as an alternative to traditional fossil fuels. (For a complete rundown on these "alternatives," see the glossary on page 5.) On the face of it, alternative fuels sound good. Renewable natural gas, biofuel, and biomass – all reuse discards that might otherwise be buried in the earth. What's there to argue with?

"At first glance, it makes complete sense that you would reuse this stuff," says Greg Cunningham, vice president and director of CLF's Clean Energy and Climate Change program. "It's not until you burrow a little below the surface that you understand the problems."

What's beneath the surface is more of the same climate-damaging fuels. "A common attribute of most alternative fuels is they are still essentially climate-damaging gases," Cunningham says. When they leak from pipes or equipment or are burned to generate heat or power, the same thing happens as when old-fashioned gas is leaked or burned – namely, damage to our climate. In fact, leaked methane and hydrogen are even more damaging to the climate than carbon dioxide.

That reality hasn't stopped the oil and gas industry from pushing their "alternative" fuels as solutions for meeting legal mandates to cut emissions across New England. Cunningham admits it can be difficult to counter industry narratives, especially when they make it seem that a reasonable solution to reducing carbon pollution is easily within our grasp. "These companies are using greenwashing to mislead policymakers and consumers into

If the fossil fuel industry's greenwashing succeeds, New England will be tied to climate-damaging, outdated infrastructure for decades to come.

IMAGE SOURCE: Shutterstock

thinking little has to change as far as the system we use to heat and power our homes and businesses," says Cunningham.

Their greenwashing campaign is one reason why "alternative" fuels were so prevalent in the debate leading up to the passage of Vermont's Affordable Heat Act this year. CLF celebrated that bill's passage, given its provisions that should limit the role of biofuels as clean heat measures and ultimately phase them out altogether.

And in the rest of New England? Massachusetts lawmakers are currently debating a clean heat standard that would include "alternative" fuels if Big Oil and Gas have their way. Meanwhile, National Grid has announced plans to use its gas pipe infrastructure in Massachusetts to distribute renewable natural gas and green hydrogen.

In Vermont, Massachusetts, and across New England, CLF advocates will keep pushing back against industry and utility company attempts to put their polluting fuels – whether "alternative" or not – at the center of the region's energy future. That means pushing for new regulations that understand the legitimate limited role "alternative fuels" can play in transitioning to a clean energy economy while championing actual clean energy solutions – like solar and wind power – that can slash the region's climate-damaging emissions.

It also means continuing to reveal the truth about false solutions calculated to keep us dependent on the outdated fossil fuels harming our planet. "We have to educate policymakers and consumers about these false solutions," says Cunningham. "They're not economic, they're not available at the scale needed to replace fossil gas as we use it now, and they're not going to cut carbon pollution."

What will cut carbon pollution, he adds, is electrifying our economy – from our heating systems to our cars, trucks, buses, and trains. "We have a readily available alternative and associated electric system in place already," he says. "We can right-size that system to increasing demand over time. That is where we need to invest resources – not propping up uneconomic, polluting fossil fuels."

This points to the inconvenient truth that fossil fuel companies are not yet prepared to admit. And that involves a fundamental reassessment of their business model.

> *"These companies are using greenwashing to mislead policymakers and consumers into thinking little has to change as far as the system we use to heat and power our homes and businesses.*
>
> - GREG CUNNINGHAM

"Many businesses are going to have to change substantially to meet the challenges of the climate crisis," says Campbell. But for those companies far sighted enough to recognize that, he says, "there's an opportunity to take a true leadership role in transitioning off natural gas to have a more durable and equally profitable business model. They're not doing their shareholders or customers any service by putting out false solutions that are ultimately ineffective, either in creating a lifeline for their outdated business model or best serving and retaining their customers."

Scientists say there is still time to lessen the effects of climate change. If we achieve our goals, we can reduce the probability of the kinds of destructive storms, devastating heat waves, and catastrophic ocean warming that have made news headlines every week this past summer.

In the end, we've got no alternative.

ALTERNATIVE FUELS

Here's a quick glossary of alternative fuel terms you're likely to see and why they may not be the solution the oil and gas industry would have us believe.

BIOFUELS

- **BIODIESEL** is manufactured from vegetable oils, animal fats, or recycled restaurant grease. Although all diesel vehicles can operate on biodiesel, many car manufacturers disapprove of pure biodiesel, so most of it must be blended with diesel derived from petroleum. The fuel also tends to gel at low temperatures, making pure biodiesel challenging in cold climates.

- **BIOMASS** includes fuels made from plants, wood, and waste that are burned to create heat, converted into electricity, or processed into biofuel. However, burning biomass has significant public health and environmental justice consequences. Harvard researchers have found that burning biomass in buildings, industry, and power plants leads to more deaths yearly than relying on conventional coal-fired power plants.

- **ETHANOL** is usually made from corn, crop residues, or wood. A recent study found that U.S. corn-based ethanol was worse for the climate than gasoline. It's also at least 24% more carbon-intensive than gasoline due to emissions from land use changes to grow corn, processing, and combustion.

- **RENEWABLE NATURAL GAS** is produced by refining biogas derived from various sources, including landfill waste, manure, and wastewater treatment facilities. Proponents argue that the waste products used to produce renewable natural gas would have emitted methane by natural decay processes, so it's better and more sustainable to reuse the material to create energy. While it is true that these processes emit climate-damaging gases, they do so primarily as a result of poor management of the systems where they are produced. In addition, the refinement process used to create renewable natural gas is highly energy-intensive. The final product is almost pure methane, which will leak in the refining process, pipeline delivery to homes, and from appliances and equipment that burn it. Even if these processes could be controlled to eliminate leakage (which they cannot), renewable natural gas is not plentiful and could only displace at most 20% of conventional natural gas's outsized role in our lives.

HYDROGEN

A product of water, hydrogen would seem a perfect solution to our fuel conundrum. But water must be processed to create hydrogen fuel, which involves methane gas. Only using electricity generated from renewable sources to process water would make this fuel green. In addition, hydrogen has a much smaller energy density than other fuels, meaning much more hydrogen must be produced to replace gas or oil. It also combusts with one-tenth the energy required for gasoline, making it very volatile in many applications, including as a heating source. It does have a limited role for industries that would be challenging to electrify.

IMAGE SOURCE: Shutterstock

PROGRESS REPORT

CLEANING UP CAPE WATERS

By: Pamela Reynolds

IMAGE SOURCE: EcoPhotography

THE PROBLEM

For years, Cape Cod's iconic bays and estuaries have been overtaken by an explosion of toxic algae. Caused by excess nitrogen from murky, foul waste emanating from antiquated septic systems, the algae outbreaks have a major effect on the region's ecosystem. When outdated septic systems dump wastewater into the Cape's uniquely porous soil, the nitrogen in that wastewater seeps quickly into local waterways. There, it feeds poisonous algae that kills plant and aquatic life and can sicken people and animals.

The worsening problem threatens the health and well-being of Cape residents and the entire regional economy. Simple summer activities such as swimming, boating, and shellfishing have become off-limits in some areas. Climate change worsens the problem by warming waters so they become a perfect petri dish for toxic algae.

CLF IN ACTION

In 2015, CLF sued the EPA to force Cape towns to clean up their act. That lawsuit spurred the Cape Cod Commission to update a wastewater management plan for the region – one that outlined steps Cape towns must take to cut their nitrogen pollution. When progress implementing the planned faltered, CLF took the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection to court. The state agency is responsible for permitting treatment plants and residential septic systems. The lawsuit called on them to stop approving outdated systems for both new and existing structures on the Cape. CLF implored the agency to update its regulations, which would move communities to more modern systems that remove nitrogen at the source.

PROGRESS

In June, in response to CLF's persistent advocacy about the dire threat overtaking Cape waters, the Department of Environmental Protection issued new regulations to reduce nitrogen output in wastewater. Towns may apply for watershed permits, which will allow each community to tailor solutions to their specific needs, by building central sewer systems or upgrading septic systems. If towns don't apply for a permit within two years, then all septic systems within specific estuaries will have to be upgraded to remove nitrogen within five years.

NEXT STEPS

The new regulations are vital for protecting the health of Cape waters and the region's residents and visitors. But it is only a first step. The next two years will be critical in seeing how serious Cape towns are in meeting the challenge. Many lower-income residents may also need assistance in replacing outdated septic systems. CLF will monitor the implementation of the new regulations to ensure they are enforced. And CLF advocates will continue to push for stricter controls on this toxic pollution regionwide to protect the region's iconic bays and estuaries from this dangerous threat.

STAY UP-TO-DATE

CLF member support was crucial in helping to reach this milestone. Sign up for CLF emails to get the latest news on the Cape and other work to clean up New England's waters. clf.org/email

Q&A WITH...

MONICA HUERTAS

As the executive director of the People's Port Authority, Monica Huertas fights to create a safe and healthy environment for all in her community.

By: Laurie O'Reilly

Across Rhode Island and New England, people of color and low-income communities often shoulder an unfair share of pollution and other environmental threats. They also are denied the environmental benefits – things like lush tree canopy, parks and other green space, or walkable neighborhoods – taken for granted in whiter, wealthier communities.

Rhode Islanders deserve better. Monica Huertas is among those leading the fight for environmental justice in her community. The mother of four's passion lies in her work as a doula, but she recognizes that for her own kids – and the babies she delivers – to grow up healthy, she and her neighbors must take a stand against the industrial pollution fouling her community.

That's why Huertas serves as executive director of the People's Port Authority, a group of Providence residents demanding community oversight over the heavily industrialized Port of Providence. She also co-chairs the Renew Rhode Island coalition, which works to build a people's movement for environmental, racial, and economic justice. And she leads the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee of Providence.

I sat with Huertas to learn about her work and commitment to environmental justice.

**This interview has been edited for clarity.*

How would you describe your Providence community?

I live in Washington Park, just a few blocks from the Port of Providence. It's a very diverse community in income and origin. You'll see a three-tenement house next to a single-family home. I'm from Puerto Rico. Across the street, in tenement housing, lives a Cambodian family. Next door, there's a Portuguese family. Legit, I just love that!

Tell me about the People's Port Authority. What's at the heart of the work that you're doing?

The People's Port Authority officially started in 2020, but we had been working since 2017. We wanted to stop the construction of a liquefied natural gas facility here in the Port of Providence. But we quickly realized that the problem was bigger than gas.

We have so many bottom-of-the-barrel things in the port. Look around. We got salt piles right here, a factory over there, and then a scrap metal facility on the other side of the street. And this is just one block. Why the heck have we got to have that in our backyard? Some are so toxic that next door – in Massachusetts and Connecticut – they're banned or illegal to store. And it's many of these things piled on top of each other.

Other port areas across the U.S. have a port authority that regulates companies to keep them in check. We don't have that here. But this is our community, and this is our port. So, we are the "people's port authority." We're making sure we are at the meetings where the decisions are made. And we're making sure that all the companies, corporations, and big conglomerates can't do anything here without oversight and input from the community.

How did you get involved in activism, particularly in environmental justice work?

After years of being homeless and struggling, things changed for me. I got my degree, had three children, my husband got a good-paying job, and we bought our first home. I felt happy.

Then I told my friend, "I'm going to plant tomatoes and have chickens." And she said, "You can't have that, the soil is contaminated. There's pollution and lead from the house."

They were right, and I found out the hard way.

I was pregnant with my fourth child when we moved to that house, and a few months after he was born, we discovered he had lead poisoning. It felt like an injustice because I had done everything we're all told to do. I had cleaned every corner, repainted the walls, and tested the home for lead. But I did not test the soil. Why would I? Why can't I even let my kid play in my backyard?

I was already involved in opposing the proposed liquefied natural gas tank. But all these things together pissed me off and made me the environmental activist I am now.

How do you explain environmental racism to people?

Environmental racism is as American as apple pie. It's basically where a group of unwanted chemicals goes into the neighborhood where the unwanted people live. They certainly do not put any of these chemicals and any of these facilities in wealthy and white neighborhoods where people speak English. It means living on the other side of the tracks, the "wrong side." And the tracks that were put there deliberately to create that divide.

You'll see scrap, tar, oil, gas, poorly funded schools, and women dying from giving birth. That's environmental racism. And those of us who live on the "wrong side" know environmental racism well. We know it because it has existed for generations.

But we love our neighborhoods and our community. And we care about them, too – mostly because we have no other choice. Because wherever we go, wherever our type of people are, that's where these types of chemicals follow.

But don't be fooled – it hasn't always been like that. It was made to be this way. But it also means we can change it back. And we are at a turning point where we're going to make it better for us again.

What do you say to residents that might feel hopeless going up against these powerful corporations?

It's hard and scary, but it's the right thing to do. And knowing that you and your community are right gives you courage.

We know our children get poisoned with lead. We see our neighbors rushing their kids to the emergency room for asthma complications from air pollution. And even during nice, beautiful days like today, we open our windows and know what we smell – gas or tar or cement or oil.

We also know what the problems are and who is responsible. And we know we deserve so much better. That's why our community shows up and speaks out. More than anything, we're happy and proud to do anything we can.

And for you personally, how do you stay motivated in the face of these challenges?

I'm a mother and I have four children, and I do this work because of them, literally. I want them to live in a good and healthy place, the place that they were born in. I've been coming back and forth between Puerto Rico and Rhode Island my whole life. But they were all born here. And I want them to be proud of the place where they were born.

Rhode Island needs an environmental justice bill

The issues that Huertas and her community fight against are far from rare. Every community should have the power to impact the decisions that affect their health, livelihoods, and quality of life. That's why groups like Huertas' are pushing state legislators to pass an environmental justice bill. This law would ensure that overburdened communities like Providence's Washington Park neighborhood have a more active voice in processes for state and city permits when industrial facilities want to build in their backyard.

You can help. Stay tuned for opportunities to urge your legislators to pass a strong environmental justice bill for Rhode Island.

Monica Huertas is fighting to stop toxic pollution in her Providence neighborhood – like the noise, odor, and grime emitted from this asphalt facility just blocks away from her home.

IMAGE SOURCE: Tom Kates

Bill and Laura Cavers

> *...CLF is the only regional organization – which makes it small enough to help individual communities but powerful enough to make transformational changes.*

'WHY I GIVE' FEATURING

BILL CAVERS

Donor since 2006

Member of the CLF Champions Club and Advocates Society

Senior Fellow 2020–2021

Connecticut State Advisory Board Member 2022–present

CLF was a household name for my family. My father worked as a corporate lawyer but spent his free time enjoying New England's waters. He also felt a calling to serve the community, which led him to serve as a CLF board member for many years.

He shared this love and appreciation of New England's waters and coastlines with me and my siblings, and today, my sister and I have chosen to carry on his legacy with our involvement at CLF.

When I retired from my career in finance, my passion for being outdoors and out on the water grew. I volunteered with the Darien Coastal Commission, where we started a water quality program and hosted clean-up events. Realizing that I wasn't ready to retire fully, I reached out to CLF about participating in its Senior Fellows program.

This fellowship was transformational. I gained a new appreciation for CLF's work. I have always been impressed by CLF, but seeing the organization take on Shell Oil showed that they can lead with solutions for the 21st century. Following my fellowship, I was inspired to join CLF's Champions Club with a monthly gift and to join the inaugural Connecticut State Advisory Board.

There are so many environmental groups, both small and large, in Connecticut, but CLF is the only regional organization – which makes it small enough to help individual communities but powerful enough to make transformational changes.

We are at a critical point in stopping the impacts of climate change, and CLF is poised to accelerate that across the region. I am excited to lead that charge along with my fellow state advisory board members in Connecticut.

HEAR MORE FROM OUR SUPPORTERS

Our donors inspire us to never give up because so much is at stake. Hear more from CLF supporters at clf.org/whywegive.

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So come visit us online and make your donation today.

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CONTACT US

Contact us today to learn more about giving to CLF.

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AROUND CLF

CONNECTICUT

After a push from environmental justice advocates, including CLF, Connecticut lawmakers significantly strengthened the state's environmental justice law to help protect communities that have historically borne the brunt of polluting industrial facilities. The new legislation gives state regulators stricter scrutiny over projects that might further harm communities already overburdened by pollution.

RHODE ISLAND

CLF pushed lawmakers to adopt a bottle deposit bill to reduce litter, increase recycling, and save cities and towns money. Gov. Dan McKee signed a resolution to create a committee to study how a bottle bill can be implemented in the state. Rhode Island is one of two New England states without a bottle return system. CLF is pressing to update or pass state bottle bills regionwide to curb rampant single-use plastic pollution.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Nashua officials rejected a proposed asphalt plant that would have been built in an environmental justice neighborhood home to many immigrants and people of color. CLF worked with Granite State Organizing Project and community members to oppose the facility. The proposed plant would have been noisy, threatened air quality, and brought hundreds of heavy diesel trucks to the neighborhood daily. The plant's developer has appealed the city's decision, and CLF will continue to support the community in its fight.

MAINE

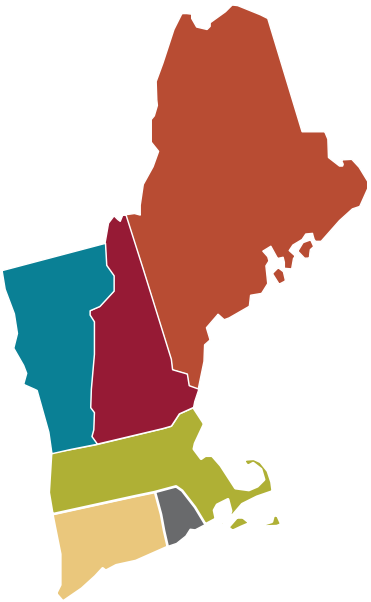
CLF has joined several partners and two tribes, the Penobscot Nation and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, to oppose a proposed mine slated to be built in the shadow of Baxter State Park and the Katahdin Woods & Waters National Monument. The mining project threatens these spectacular natural resources and Wabanaki Nation lands and waters.

MASSACHUSETTS

CLF has filed a lawsuit against a Quincy manufacturing facility for violating the Clean Air and Clean Water acts. Twin Rivers Technologies is polluting two nearby rivers with oil, grease, heavy metals, and other harmful substances. The facility also emits dangerous amounts of air pollutants into nearby neighborhoods. CLF's lawsuit aims to force the company to end its unlawful pollution.

VERMONT

CLF has joined a community effort to clean up dangerous pollution draining from underneath the Coventry Landfill and making its way into nearby waterways, including the Black River and Lake Memphremagog. A drain beneath the landfill discharges runoff polluted with toxic "forever" chemicals, arsenic, and cadmium into nearby wetlands that flow into the lake, which provides drinking water for 175,000 Canadian residents. The outcome of this effort will have ripple effects on how the state protects water quality across Vermont.



Chimney Pond and Mount Katahdin in Maine's Baxter State Park.

IMAGE SOURCE: EcoPhotography

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

In the last few months, we have witnessed extreme weather events that have been shocking in their scope and intensity. Near-biblical plagues of wildfire smoke, prolonged heat waves, torrential rains, and destructive floods were only the beginning. Also in the news: ocean water in Florida as warm as bathwater and warnings that it is too late to save summer Arctic ice.

The drumbeat of dismal news has made one thing clear: Climate change is here. And if there is any hope of slowing its pace, we need to end our fossil fuel dependency more quickly.

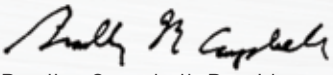
Despite incontrovertible evidence that their products accelerate climate change, fossil fuel and plastics companies have spent decades alternately undermining climate science and disingenuously spotlighting their minimal investments in clean energy. Their websites boast of "renewable natural gas" and "lower carbon energy," efforts to rebrand and misbrand rather than phase out fossil fuels. Shell Oil's CEO recently doubled down in a shameful display of climate indifference, calling it "irresponsible" to cut oil and gas production when the world economy still depends on fossil fuels.

This summer's alarming headlines – including the epic floods in Vermont – remind us that it is "irresponsible" to continue loading up our atmosphere with massive amounts of climate-damaging pollution. Extreme heat, flooding, and fire will only become more extreme and frequent if we buy into the purportedly "renewable" and "low-carbon" strategies peddled not only by major oil companies but by your local utility – all an effort to delay any meaningful transition to clean energy sources.

The fossil fuel industry spent billions to sabotage trust in climate science. Now, they're spending billions to recast some fossil fuels as clean and sustainable. Both tactics are hypocritical – and unlawful. And they are having lethal consequences locally and globally.

Accountability – often on the receiving end of a lawsuit – is the only counterweight to stop these cynical "greenwashing" strategies and protect communities hit first and worst by climate change and pollution. Whether it's lawbreaking polluters or foot-dragging public officials, your support of CLF makes accountability possible.

And I am ever grateful.



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