

COMMENTARY

ENVIRONMENT

MY TURN

BY GUEST COMMENTARY 

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California faces massive costs related to climate change. Oil industry must pay its fair share



Sea Level Rise ~ Cal Matters Water level will rise in the Mission Bay area of San Francisco and affect the popular lunch spot, Mission Rock Resort. (Photo by Penni Gladstone.)



By Scott Wiener, Special to CalMatters

California is confronting massive challenges due to climate change. One of the most pressing questions is who will foot the bill for the huge investments we must make in climate resiliency infrastructure so that we can survive and thrive.

Cities and counties, including my own district in San Francisco and San Mateo County, are projecting billions in costs to fortify our seawalls and protect our homes, businesses, and infrastructure from floods, wildfires, and other climate-related disasters.

According to a study by the [Center for Climate Integrity](#), our coastal communities will need to spend as much \$22 billion on seawalls in the next 20 years.

As a state senator and former local elected official, I'm keenly aware that struggling municipal budgets cannot—and should not—take on such enormous costs alone.

And, rightfully so, California cities and counties are leading the way toward a more just and equitable solution by insisting that fossil fuel companies, which have made countless billions from the very products that have caused our climate crisis, pay their share to help communities recover from and adapt to a warming planet.

San Francisco, Oakland, Richmond, Santa Cruz, and Imperial Beach, and the counties of San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Marin have filed lawsuits that seek to make these multi-billion dollar climate polluters, including Exxon, BP, Shell, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips, compensate our local governments for the damage they've caused.

An upcoming decision from the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals could signal that the fossil fuel industry may finally be held accountable for its misdeeds, just like tobacco and opioid companies that similarly inflicted severe harm and costs on the public.

It might come as a surprise that as far back as the 1970s and 1980s, some of the world's

leaders in climate science were fossil fuel companies, particularly Exxon.

Thanks to the work of brave whistleblowers and intrepid reporters, we now know that internal research by Exxon and others in the industry predicted that the burning of fossil fuels would warm the climate and lead to many of the precise impacts that now endanger California communities: heat waves, droughts, sea-level rise, and larger and more intense wildfires.

Rather than share this knowledge with the public and steer the industry away from this catastrophic harm, oil companies instead decided, in the words of one [1988 internal Exxon memo](#), to “emphasize the uncertainty in scientific conclusions regarding the potential enhanced Greenhouse effect.”

These corporations knew their products would cause climate change, and they responded with an unprecedented and multifaceted disinformation campaign that sowed confusion among the public and policymakers.

As Dr. Martin Hoffert, a former Exxon scientific consultant, [testified before Congress in October](#): “Exxon was publicly promoting views that its own scientists knew were wrong.”

Flash forward to the present. Californians are paying the price for the fossil fuel industry’s decades of deception. In my district, rising sea-levels caused by climate change threaten billions of dollars in infrastructure, including homes, roads, transit, businesses, parks, beaches, and airports.

It is only right that the fossil fuel industry that created these damages, and lied about it while making billions, help our cash-strapped municipalities fund efforts to mitigate the harm.

The city attorneys of San Francisco and Oakland have stated that the goal of their lawsuits against fossil fuel companies is simply to “protect our residents, workers, and businesses from the costs and damage these fossil fuel companies knowingly imposed on our communities.”

Should we all do everything in our power, no matter how small, to reduce our impact on the climate? Absolutely.

As a legislator, I have made our climate future and a transition to a clean economy a top priority. We must all take responsibility to reduce our collective carbon footprint.

Yet the truth is that we, as individuals, do not share equal responsibility for our warming planet.

The oil and gas industry, more than any other, brought these expensive climate damages to our doorstep, and have left California taxpayers with the bill.

On behalf of my district, I thank our local officials for standing up for our residents, and I hope the 9th Circuit agrees that our communities deserve to finally have their day in court to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable.

Sen. Scott Wiener is a Democrat who represents Senate District 11 in San Francisco and San Mateo County, senator.wiener@sen.ca.gov. He wrote this commentary for CalMatters.

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