



# Climate action supporters: The fossil fuel industry is not your friend

BY KAREN C. SOKOL, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/02/21 03:00 PM EDT  
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

30 SHARES

SHARE

TWEET



## Just In...

**Indiana State Fair returning with changes after cancelation in 2020**

STATE WATCH — 1M 45S AGO

**China: Biden should seek diplomacy with North Korea, not 'extreme pressure'**

INTERNATIONAL — 4M 59S AGO

**McCarthy: House Republicans 'concerned' Cheney can't carry out her job**

HOUSE — 14M 48S AGO

**Titans draft pick Rashad Weaver charged with assaulting woman**

IN THE KNOW — 16M 51S AGO

**19 killed in pandemic-related Colombia protests**

INTERNATIONAL — 17M 41S AGO

**Will Biden provide strategic clarity or further ambiguity on Taiwan?**

OPINION — 27M 32S AGO

**Caitlyn Jenner: California needs a 'thoughtful disruptor'**

CAMPAIGN — 32M 32S AGO

**Pfizer earned \$3.5 billion on COVID-19 vaccine in first quarter**

BUSINESS & LOBBYING — 35M 13S AGO

VIEW ALL

View Latest Opinions >>

A week after taking office, President Joe Biden issued an [executive order](#) “on tackling the climate crisis” that aims to face the challenge comprehensively and equitably. Biden has quickly appointed and seen confirmed a [team of leaders](#) who are committed to all aspects of this mission. Our country is finally on the cusp of meaningful climate action. The climate action train is so popular that even fossil fuel companies, which have historically [sought to derail it](#), are now saying they’re [on board](#).

We should, of course, welcome all sincere collaborators; the fossil fuel industry is not among them.

Yes, major oil and gas companies are finally, if reluctantly, beginning to publicly acknowledge the climate crisis, and some even claim to “[support](#)” the Paris Agreement’s goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

These claims are a central part of the industry’s massive PR and lobbying campaign to position itself as an essential leader in the country’s transition to a “[low-carbon](#)” future. But given the industry’s decades-long and painfully successful effort to [hide and deny the science](#) of dangerous climate disruption in order to block national and international efforts to address it, its recent insistence on being a key part of the climate solution — and entitled to VIP status at the climate policymaking table — bears scrutiny. This is particularly so now, since science indicates that we likely still have time to maintain a habitable planet if we get climate policy right.

Fortunately, a [new study](#) published in the journal Energy Research & Social Science provides much-needed insight. The study examines whether executive pay at the top four investor-owned carbon emitting energy companies is consistent with their purported climate-friendly commitments.

Authors Dario Kenner and Richard Heede conclude that it is not.

Contrary to their claims, these companies remain steadfast in accelerating a climate apocalypse, Kenner and Heede find. “[W]hat the executives and directors (of these four companies) share in common is a desire to maintain demand for oil and gas, and to defend their company’s

social license to operate,” they write. “They are paid to run fossil fuel supply chains — with large greenhouse gas emissions.”

That business plan — though key to the survival of an industry whose core business today remains oil and gas and whose investments assume that will continue to be the case beyond 2050 — is planetary suicide. These companies’ climate-friendly statements are merely a Trojan horse designed to maintain their “social license to operate” and secure a seat at the table so they can continue to undermine climate policy.

What does this mean for policymakers who are serious about surviving the climate crisis? First, they should question climate policies the fossil fuel industry is pushing and seek independent and rigorous evaluation of them. Second, they should not weaken or deprioritize policies that the industry opposes, particularly those that would significantly limit oil and gas extraction and production — the very thing that must be rapidly scaled down and ultimately abandoned for climate action to have any hope of succeeding.

The industry, however, attacks any suggestion of ramping down production of fossil fuels and transitioning to carbon-free energy systems, particularly at the rapid pace required to maintain a habitable planet. That goal, of course, must be front and center of meaningful climate action.

Instead, the industry advocates for market mechanisms, even more government subsidies for fossil fuels, and continuing production. At the same time, it calls for “capturing” carbon emissions with technologies that have proven to be neither feasible nor safe and that require new infrastructure that will disproportionately harm communities that already disproportionately suffer from our existing fossil fuel infrastructure.

**Overnight Energy: EPA takes major step to battle climate change**  
**Carper asks EPA to require half of new cars to be zero-emissions by...**

These policy goals certainly support the industry’s core fossil fuel business. But they are, at best, a distraction from the core of meaningful climate policy: transitioning away from fossil fuels. At worst, they undermine it.

Fortunately, we do have true heroes who should be at the head of the climate policymaking table: those who have been at the frontlines of the climate crisis. At the international level, they are developing countries, and particularly low-lying island states. At the national level, they are communities targeted for oil and gas infrastructure siting, which are mostly Black, Brown and indigenous communities. In sharp contrast to the fossil fuel industry’s interests in its survival, their interests in survival align with the Paris goals, and thus with those of this planet and all people who inhabit it.

*Karen C. Sokol is a professor of law at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law and is a member scholar of the Center for Progressive Reform.*

**TAGS** JOE BIDEN CLIMATE ACTION CLIMATE CRISIS FOSSIL FUELS FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY  
CLIMATE POLICY BIDEN CLIMATE POLICY ENVIRONMENT NET-ZERO EMISSIONS PARIS AGREEMENT  
LOW-CARBON

SHARE

TWEET

