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Opinion

Fossil Fuel Industry Up To Same Old Tricks

By Bob Doppelt

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The fossil fuel industry has significant sway over Oregon politics. This became evident during my time at the State Capitol working on climate legislation. They use a decades-old ago strategy that has continually blocked policies to cut greenhouse gases.

First, a little history. Scientists have known about the dangers of adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere since the late 1800s. That's when Irish physicist John Tyndall and Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius determined that, because carbon dioxide absorbs heat, adding more to the natural blanket of gases that surround the earth by burning coal and oil would raise global temperatures.

The new book "Losing Earth: A Recent History" by Nathaniel Rich describes developments since then. Numerous reports completed in the early and mid-1900s proved Tyndall and Arrhenius correct, including a major one in 1957 by Roger Revelle and Hans Suess warning that by burning fossil fuels, humans are engaging in a major geophysical experiment.

Fast forward to the 1980s, when many additional assessments warned Congress the impacts of burning coal, oil and gas would be substantial and time was short to prevent calamity. By then the fossil fuel industry understood the risks. Royal Dutch Shell, for instance, produced an extensive internal report that accepted the science and described the social and economic effects.

In 1988 Exxon held a workshop attended by almost a hundred industry executives where its own in-house expert said climate change was real: Burning fossil fuels was heating the planet. But the participants were only concerned about their firms, not reducing emissions. So they agreed on a strategy to "highlight uncertainties in the science, question the effectiveness of any new regulations" and in other ways block policies that might hurt their profits.

Thus began the industry's 30-year effort to kill emission reduction legislation. To bamboozle the public, it has promoted narratives such as: Carbon dioxide does not cause warming; the climate is always changing; if warming occurs it will be mild; the impacts are a century off; cutting local emission will have little effect globally; the market will fix any problem; renewable energy cannot power America; restricting fossil fuels will cost too much; and more.

Industry lobbyists also pressure politicians to block regulations with campaign contributions, and with claims that they will be ineffective, waste public resources, be counterproductive and — always — require more research. All the while, the industry tries to paint a rosy public image of helping communities and the environment.

This strategy is being used to delay and weaken SB 2020, the cap and trade legislation, and other climate bills in the Legislature. Swarms of lobbyists walk the halls of the Capitol voicing the narratives, trade groups promote them, some legislators recite them verbatim and several newspaper editorials have repeated the themes.

In 1990, two years after the Exxon meeting, humans released more than 20 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In 2018 the total was over 37 BMTs, putting civilization at risk. This is what legislators should remember when they deliberate passing strong climate legislation.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.