

California sues oil giants, alleging climate-risks deception

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California is on the front lines of climate change-fueled wildfires, flooding and other extreme weather phenomena.

The US state of California sued five of the world's largest oil companies on Friday, alleging the firms caused billions of dollars in damages and

misled the public by minimizing the risks from fossil fuels, according to a court filing.

The suit, dismissed by one defendant as "meritless" and "politicized," follows numerous other cases brought by US cities, counties and states against fossil fuel interests over the impact of climate change as well as alleged disinformation campaigns spanning decades.

The civil case was filed in superior court in San Francisco against ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, ConocoPhillips and Chevron, which is headquartered in California. The American Petroleum Institute (API), an industry group, is also a defendant in the case.

"Oil and gas company executives have known for decades that reliance on fossil fuels would cause these catastrophic results, but they suppressed that information from the public and policymakers by actively pushing out disinformation on the topic," the 135-page complaint read.

"Their deception caused a delayed societal response to global warming. And their misconduct has resulted in tremendous costs to people, property and natural resources, which continue to unfold each day."

The suit seeks the creation of an abatement fund to pay for future damages caused by climate disasters in California, which is on the front lines of climate change-fueled wildfires, flooding and other extreme weather phenomena.

"By downplaying the scientific consensus on climate change and emphasizing uncertainty, defendants hoped to delay any regulatory action that might seek to reduce or control (greenhouse gas) emissions, thereby threatening the industry's profits," the complaint added.

A spokesperson for API slammed the lawsuit, arguing that climate policy "is for Congress to debate and decide, not the court system."

"This ongoing, coordinated campaign to wage meritless, politicized lawsuits against a foundational American industry and its workers is nothing more than a distraction from important national conversations and an enormous waste of California taxpayer resources," the spokesperson, Andrea Woods, told AFP.

Chevron also hit out against the lawsuit, with a spokesperson telling AFP that climate change "is a global problem that requires a coordinated international policy response, not piecemeal litigation for the benefit of lawyers and politicians."

California "courts have no constructive or constitutionally permissible role in crafting global energy policy," the spokesperson added.

Shell offered a similar take, with a spokesperson saying the fossil fuel giant agrees "that action is needed now on climate change" but that the courtroom "is not the right venue."

'Watershed moment'

Activists said it was a "watershed moment" in the pushback against oil companies, with the Center for Climate Integrity noting that California "is now the world's largest economy and the first major oil-producing state to take fossil fuel companies to court for their climate deception."

"California's move is an unmistakable sign that the wave of climate lawsuits against Big Oil will keep growing and that these polluters' days of escaping accountability for their lies are numbered," the Washington-based nonprofit's president Richard Wiles said in a statement.

"For more than 50 years, Big Oil has been lying to us—covering up the fact that they've long known how dangerous the fossil fuels they produce are for our planet," California Governor Gavin Newsom said in a statement on Friday.

"California is taking action to hold big polluters accountable," he added.

Since the current wave of environmental litigation against fossil fuel firms began around 2017, the industry has sought to avoid state trials on procedural grounds.

That effort received a major blow in May, when the US Supreme Court declined to consider an appeal in two cases, meaning they could proceed.

The lawsuits are modeled on successful cases against Big Tobacco as well as against the pharmaceutical industry over the proliferation of opioids.

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