

# The NZ ad industry wants to clean up its climate act, but will agencies drop their fossil fuel clients?

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At the launch of the [Auckland Climate Festival](#) last month, Green Party Auckland Central MP [Chlöe Swarbrick](#) spoke about how building a

community is the best way to avoid being overwhelmed by the scale of the climate emergency.

Advertising might not have been the first thing on Swarbrick's mind. But earlier in August, New Zealand's Commercial Communications Council had announced its own community initiative to address emissions within the [advertising](#) sector.

Labeled [Ad Net Zero](#), it's part of an international framework launched in the U.K. late in 2020. "Our ambition," it states, "is to reduce the carbon impact of developing, producing and running advertising."

To support the industry reducing its own emissions, Ad Net Zero is built around a five-point "[action plan](#)," the first four points of which are to reduce emissions in different areas of the business.

But it's the fifth point that will show whether the agencies that have signed up really mean to change: "harness advertising's power to support consumer behavior change."

One would assume that includes moving consumers away from [fossil fuel consumption](#). However, right now, this seems unlikely. Every New Zealand agency that represents a large [fuel](#) company has signed up to Ad Net Zero, and they are still creating ads for their petrol station clients.

## **Risk of greenwashing**

Every time I jumped in my car this weekend (it's electric before you accuse me of hypocrisy) I heard an ad for a fuel company and how many cents I could save per liter. Is this not where advertising might make the biggest difference?

Internationally, agency leaders are [on the record](#) about sustainability and

how the industry is leading the way in reducing emissions. Considerably less attention is paid to the environmental impacts of the work they do for their client roster.

The risk here is that the advertising industry itself will be perceived to be indulging in the same "[greenwashing](#)" that so many consumer products and services are already accused of practicing.

But the issue goes beyond just the industry. Despite having [declared a climate emergency](#), the New Zealand government still allows the consumer incentives driven by fuel discounts. Brand extensions such as AA Smartfuel, Mobil Smiles and Z Energy Pumped all thrive off relatively cheap in-store and radio advertising targeting consumers in their cars.

## Fossil fuel ad bans

There are already international precedents for ending these kinds of campaigns. In France, for example, any company promoting fossil fuel products can now be [fined up to €100,000](#).

Greenpeace has argued the French law doesn't go far enough. But it still provides a stark contrast with New Zealand—which continues to trade on its "[100% Pure](#)" image while allowing incentives for fuel purchases.

Two Dutch cities have taken [the advertising ban](#) even further. Amsterdam's metro system banned the advertising of fossil-fueled transport, including flights and non-electric cars, in 2021.

And next year Haarlem will prohibit these types of ads and all holiday flight advertising in public places. The city has also become the first in the world to [ban ads for meat](#) due to its consumption contributing to the climate crisis. (One can hear the [Groundswell](#) tractors revving at the

mere thought of this happening in Aotearoa.)

Dropping fossil fuel clients would undoubtedly affect agency income and jobs. But it is also advertising's job to find creative solutions to clients' problems. Maybe such a move would present new opportunities for the New Zealand industry.

## Climate-conscious creatives

Brands and their advertising [amplify](#) and [help accelerate](#) movements in global culture. The question now is, can advertising's storytellers truly accelerate our emissions reduction?

Ad Net Zero is a good start. But a commitment to dropping high-emission clients is more challenging. This is where overseas initiatives such as [Comms Declare](#) and [Clean Creatives](#) come in.

These organizations, both established in 2020, aim to help individuals, agencies and clients within the industry divest themselves of fossil fuels by refusing to take on new fossil fuel contracts or work with agencies that still have them on the books.

[Creatives for Climate](#), established by a young New Zealander in Amsterdam around the same time, shares these aims and is [launching a New Zealand chapter](#) at the Auckland Climate Festival later this month. The movement of climate-conscious creatives is here and it's growing.

In the long term, Ad Net Zero will need to prove it stands for true change if it's to avoid accusations of being a greenwashing campaign itself.

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