

Bans on fossil fuel advertising are coming—and sport should not be exempt

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In a [recent speech](#), UN secretary-general António Guterres called upon "every country to ban advertising from fossil fuel companies." He urged the professional services and creative industries to "stop taking on new fossil fuel clients, from today, and set out plans to drop your existing ones."

One sector that Guterres omitted from his speech was sport. This is somewhat surprising given recent trends in sponsorship and ownership within the industry that have been tracked through my work with colleagues at the campaign [Badvertising](#) and the [Cool Down—Sport for Climate Action Network](#).

The past few years have seen sport deepen its ties with [fossil fuel companies](#), with banks that continue to finance [fossil fuel projects](#), and with [states](#) that are heavily invested in the continued dominance of fossil fuels. Billboards surrounding pitches, team shirts and tournament naming rights are peppered with the names and logos of [SUV manufacturers](#), [airlines](#) and [cruise ships](#).

The sheer variety of these deals is astounding. They cover everything from team sponsorships, to commercial partnerships with individual athletes. A number of petrostates have bought [whole football clubs](#) as part of an increasing push towards [multi-club](#) ownership models.

Governing bodies at the top of their respective sports, such as Fifa, have penned "[global partnerships](#)" with the largest polluters on the planet. Everywhere you look, sport is awash with fossil fuel money.

Guterres' call for advertising controls is not a bolt from the blue. As he himself conceded, "many governments restrict or prohibit advertising for products that harm human health—like tobacco." In this vein, towns,

cities and whole countries are increasingly exploring restrictions on advertising for [fossil fuel firms](#) and other high-carbon products and services, such as short-haul flights and large SUVs.

In May 2024, the Scottish capital Edinburgh introduced a [landmark ban](#) on adverts from [fossil fuel companies](#), arms manufacturers, SUVs and airlines across council-owned advertising spaces, including billboards, bus stops and digital media. These companies will also no longer be able to sponsor events or other partnerships in the city. Sport will undoubtedly be impacted by emerging regulations like these.

The pushback against fossil fuel advertising is not just a state-led trend either. For decades, cultural institutions like art galleries and museums have been cutting ties with [fossil fuel sponsors](#) after tireless campaigning by groups like [Culture Unstained](#). More recently, a series of [high-profile book festivals](#) dropped their sponsors due to ongoing investments into fossil fuels.

Sport, the final frontier

Amid this strengthening social tide, sport appears to be swimming in the wrong direction. As other sectors shun fossil fuel sponsors, sport is becoming a final frontier.

Put simply, this is because sport sponsorship works. In marketing and advertising circles, sport continues to be ranked as one of the most trustworthy channels for promoting goods and services and [bolstering brand reputations](#). The intense collective emotions of sport can, over time, reduce negative attitude towards a problematic sponsor.

As climate change gets worse, fossil fuel companies are likely to dig in their heels and use sport to maintain their reputation. The soft power of sport has long been recognized and [some countries](#) are keen to take

advantage of this in what is becoming an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical context. Amid these shifts, sport can provide a safe haven for both capital and national interests.

Even gathering a clear sense of the scale and depth of fossil fuel entanglement with sport is difficult. Sponsorship deals often lack transparency over their length and the sums paid, as well as the contributions made to charitable foundations and other arms of sports organizations. Likewise, acquisition deals are often not disclosed in full and payment terms and conditions can be mind-bendingly complex. When it comes to the hosting of events, the decision-making processes and internal politics of governing bodies like Fifa can be opaque at best.

These entanglements are putting sport in a perilous position. As it gets harder to ignore the impact fossil fuels have on the climate, athletes and fans will increasingly speak out. Key tournaments will continue to be targeted by activists and campaigners, often on the grounds of sponsorship.

If deals become untenable and are cut short, reputational risks will quickly cascade into financial ones. Some sports organizations are introducing specific clauses into [sponsorship contracts](#) as a bulwark against these growing risks—but that might not be enough.

Anti-tobacco tactics

Sport has set a precedent in ending the advertisement of certain products after science and social norms reached a tipping point. Tobacco and cigarette adverts were once ubiquitous throughout sport, with the stars of the day—such as baseball's [Babe Ruth](#)—promoting specific cigarette brands and their purported health benefits.

Yet once the science became clear, the lobbying tactics of the companies

were revealed, and sports fans saw first-hand the dangers of smoking rip through their families and communities, sport snubbed it out. There is no reason why it cannot end fossil fuel sponsorship.

While sport overall appears to be slow to act, many organizations have acted unilaterally. The English rugby union governing body turned down a [£2.5 million deal with ExxonMobil](#), while Tennis Australia ended its partnership with [gas giant Santos](#) after public backlash. There are many other instances.

Formalizing these efforts, pooling insights, as well as exploring and experimenting with alternative means of funding and sponsorship could turn the tide. Norms are inherently dynamic, and can change at breakneck speed—if a few influential clubs move and normalize fossil-free values, others could follow suit.

Many big sports organizations are now embedding sustainability throughout their work. But others continue to promote the very companies that are guaranteeing more extreme [climate change](#), greater disruptions to sporting calendars and ensuring that large swathes of the world will be almost totally inhospitable for sport to be played in. This is a huge blind spot, with fossil fuel sponsorship undermining the many impactful initiatives launched by the industry.

There's no doubt that Guterres' words will be rattling around the commercial departments of the global sports industry: "fossil fuels are not only poisoning our planet—they're toxic for your brand."

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