

Governments urged to act after oil giants accused of misleading public

Documents suggest Shell and BP staff privately downplayed public commitments on climate crisis



Shell was last year ordered to cut its global carbon emissions by 45% by the end of 2030 compared with 2019 levels. Photograph: Nick Smyth/Alamy

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Campaigners have urged governments to intervene after oil companies were accused of misleading the public about their commitment to reducing carbon emissions.

Oil and gas companies including Britain's Shell and BP were urged to "stop their deception" this week as the US House committee on oversight and reform **released documents** showing that oil industry executives privately downplayed their public messages on efforts to tackle the climate crisis.

The memo claimed that internal BP documents highlighted how carbon capture and storage (CCS) – a nascent technology that involves inserting CO₂ emissions

into underground rock formations – could “enable the full use of fossil fuels across the energy transition and beyond”.

Could Wael Sawan usher in a renewable revolution at Shell?

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Congressional investigators also unearthed an internal Shell email discussing carbon capture, utilisation, and storage (CCUS) in which an executive said: “We want to be careful to not talk about CCUS as prolonging the life of oil, gas or fossil fuels writ large.”

The committee said internal Shell messaging guidance – developed to “insulate Shell” from lawsuits about “greenwashing” and “misleading investors” on the climate crisis – calls on employees to emphasise that net zero emissions is “a collective ambition for the world” rather than a “Shell goal or target”.

The guidance tells employees: “Please do not give the impression that Shell is willing to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to levels that do not make business sense.”

In separate documents, the oil companies Exxon and Chevron appeared to ask the industry-led Oil and Gas Climate Initiative (OGCI) to “remove language that potentially commits members to enhanced climate-related governance, strategy, risk management, and performance metrics and targets” and to avoid any “explicit commitment for OGCI companies to align their advocacy with their climate related positions” – including advocacy for [the 2015 Paris agreement](#).

Climate campaigners and some investors have pushed energy companies to commit to more ambitious emissions reduction targets. The activist investor Follow This has tabled resolutions at shareholder meetings in an attempt to get companies to agree to targets in line with the Paris accord.

Shell [lost a landmark ruling in the Dutch courts last year](#), when a judge ordered it to cut its global carbon emissions by 45% by the end of 2030 compared with 2019 levels. Campaigners hope the incoming chief executive, Wael Sawan, whose appointment was announced on Thursday, [can increase the company’s investment in green energy](#).

The committee said that, after Shell posted on Twitter asking others what they would do to reduce emissions, a communications executive wrote privately that he agreed this could be seen as “gaslighting” the public. “We are, after all, in a tweet like this implying others need to sacrifice without focusing on ourselves,” he said.

Carolyn Maloney, the chair of the House committee on oversight and reform, said: “As we face more deadly, extreme weather around the globe, fossil fuel companies are reaping record profits and ramping up their misleading PR tactics to distract from their central role in fuelling the climate crisis.

“My committee’s investigation leaves no doubt that, in the words of one company official, big oil is ‘gaslighting’ the public. These companies claim they are part of the solution to climate change, but internal documents reveal that they are continuing with business as usual. I call on the big fossil fuel companies to stop their deception and cut their emissions now – before it is too late.”

Jamie Peters, a campaigner at Friends of the Earth, said: “Big oil firms like Shell, Exxon and Chevron can try to gloss over their murky PR image as much as they like, as we’ve seen in the millions of dollars pumped into disingenuous greenwash campaigns by the industry. But though unsurprising, this bombshell disclosure confirms what remains utterly transparent about big oil. That it has every intention to keep on extracting in pursuit of profit, rather than transforming how it operates for the sake of our communities and our planet.

“Millions are already experiencing dangerous climate breakdown in extreme heatwaves and devastating floods, **like those in Pakistan**, as the world’s biggest polluters continue to shirk their responsibilities. They’ll continue to act only in the interests of their shareholders unless governments intervene.”

The Guardian revealed last month that **BP has spent more than £800,000** on social media influence ads in the UK this year that champion the company’s investments in green energy.

A Shell spokesperson said: “Of the nearly 500,000 pages provided to the committee, the small handful they chose to highlight are evidence of Shell’s extensive efforts to set aggressive targets, evolve its portfolio and meaningfully participate in the ongoing energy transition.”

An Exxon spokesperson said: “We have supported the Paris agreement from its start in 2015 and continue to support the US government’s participation in the framework. The selective publication of dated emails, without context, is a deliberate attempt to generate a narrative that does not reflect the commitment of ExxonMobil – and its employees, to address climate change and play a leading role in the transition to a net zero future.”

BP told Bloomberg it has set near-term targets consistent with its ambition to become a net zero company by 2050.

Chevron has been contacted for comment.

Criticism intensifies after big oil admits ‘gaslighting’ public over green aims

Fury as ‘explosive’ files reveal largest oil companies contradicted public statements and wished bedbugs upon critical activists



Exxon, which recently announced profits of \$17.9bn for the three months until June. Photograph: Andrew Kelly/Reuters

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Criticism in the US of the oil industry's obfuscation over the climate crisis is intensifying after internal documents showed companies attempted to distance themselves from agreed climate goals, admitted "gaslighting" the public over purported efforts to go green, and even wished critical activists be infested by bedbugs.

The communications were unveiled as part of a congressional hearing held in Washington DC, where an investigation into the role of fossil fuels in driving the climate crisis produced documents obtained from the oil giants ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell and BP.

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they wish bedbugs on you, then you win," said Varshini Prakash, executive director of Sunrise. The organization accused Shell of a "legacy of violence and of ignoring the wellbeing of communities across the globe".

The revelations are part of the third hearing held by the House committee on oversight and reform on how the fossil-fuel industry sought to hamper the effort to address the climate crisis. Democrats, who lead the committee, called top executives from the oil companies to testify last year, in which they denied they had misled the public.

The new documents are "the latest evidence that oil giants keep lying about their commitments to help solve the climate crisis and should never be trusted by policymakers", said Richard Wiles, president of the Center for Climate Integrity.

"If there is one thing consistent about the oil and gas majors' position on climate, it's their utter inability to tell the truth," Wiles added.

Ro Khanna, co-chair of the committee, said the new documents are "explosive" and show a "culture of intense disrespect" to climate activists. The oil giants' "climate pledges rely on unproven technology, accounting gimmicks and misleading language to hide the reality," he added. "Big oil executives are laughing at the people trying to protect our planet while they knowingly work to destroy it."

Several of the emails and memos within **the released trove of documents** appear to show executives, staffers and lobbyists internally contradicting public pronouncements by their companies to act on lowering planet-heating emissions.

Exxon, which recently announced profits of \$17.9bn for the three months until June, more than three times what it earned in the same quarter a year ago, has publicly said it is “committed” to the Paris climate agreement to curb global heating.

However, the documents released by the Democratic-led House committee include an August 2019 memo by an executive to Darren Woods, Exxon’s chief executive, on the need to “remove reference to Paris agreement” from an announcement by an industry lobby group that Exxon is a member of.

Such a statement “could create a potential commitment to advocate on the Paris agreement goals”, the executive warned. A separate note on a 2018 Exxon presentation also admitted that biofuels derived from algae was still “decades away from the scale we need”, despite the company long promoting it as a way to lower emissions.

Shell, meanwhile, has committed to becoming a “net zero” emissions business by 2050, and yet the documents show a private 2020 communication in which employees are urged to never “imply, suggest, or leave it open for possible misinterpretation that (net zero) is a Shell goal or target”. Shell has “no immediate plans to move to a net-zero emissions portfolio” over the next 10 to 20 years, it added.

A Shell tweet posted in 2020 asking others what they could do to reduce emissions resulted in a torrent of ridicule from Twitter users. A communications executive for the company wrote privately that criticism that the tweet was “gaslighting” the public was “not totally without merit” and that the tweet was “pretty tone deaf”. He added: “We are, after all, in a tweet like this implying others need to sacrifice without focusing on ourselves.”

The UK-headquartered oil company, which in July announced a record \$11.5bn quarterly profit, also poured scorn on climate activists, with a communications

specialist at the company emailing in 2019 that he wished “bedbugs” upon the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led US climate group.

Previous releases of internal documents have shown that the oil industry knew of the devastating impact of climate change but chose instead to downplay and even deny these findings publicly in order to maintain their business model.

The hearings have been attacked by Republicans as a method to “wage war on America’s energy producers” and the oil companies involved have complained that the documents don’t show the full picture of their stance on the climate crisis.

Exxon supports the 2015 Paris climate deal, a spokesman said, claiming that the “selective publication of dated emails, without context, is a deliberate attempt to generate a narrative that does not reflect the commitment of ExxonMobil and its employees, to address climate change and play a leading role in the transition to a net-zero future.”

A Shell spokesman, meanwhile, said the committee chose to highlight only a small handful of the nearly half a million pages it provided to the body on its “extensive efforts” to take part in the energy transition.

“Within that pursuit are challenging internal and external discussions that signal Shell’s intent to form partnerships and share pathways we deem critical to becoming a net-zero energy business,” he said.