

California sues oil companies claiming they downplayed the risk of fossil fuels

Civil lawsuit filed by the state targets Exxon Mobil, Shell, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and BP

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- California governor Gavin Newsom speaks to reporters. The state has filed a lawsuit against some of the world's largest oil and gas companies. Photograph: Rich Pedroncelli/AP
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California has filed a lawsuit against some of the world's largest oil and gas companies, claiming they deceived the public and downplayed the risks posed by fossil fuels.

The civil lawsuit filed in state Superior Court in San Francisco also seeks creation of a fund – financed by the companies – to pay for recovery efforts after devastating storms and fires. Democratic governor Gavin Newsom said in a statement the companies named in the lawsuit – Exxon Mobil, Shell, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and BP – should be held accountable.

“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,” Newsom said. “California taxpayers shouldn’t have to foot the bill for billions of dollars in damages – wildfires wiping out entire communities, toxic smoke clogging our air, deadly heatwaves, record-breaking droughts parching our wells.”

The 135-page complaint argues that the companies have known since at least the 1960s that the burning of fossil fuels would warm the planet and change the climate, but they downplayed the looming threat in public statements and marketing.

It said the companies’ scientists knew as far back as the 1950s that the climate impacts would be catastrophic, and that there was only a narrow window of time in which communities and governments could respond.

Instead, the lawsuit said, the companies mounted a disinformation campaign beginning at least as early as the 1970s to discredit a growing scientific consensus on climate change, and disputed climate change-related risks.

The American Petroleum Institute, an industry group also named in the lawsuit, said climate policy should be debated in Congress, not the courtroom.

“This ongoing, coordinated campaign to wage meritless, politicised 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,” institute senior vice-president Ryan Meyers said in a statement.

That was echoed in a statement from Shell, which said the courtroom is not the proper venue to address global warming.

“Addressing climate change requires a collaborative, society-wide approach,” the energy company said. “We agree that action is needed now on climate change, and we fully support the need for society to transition to a lower-carbon future.”

California’s legal action joins similar lawsuits filed by states and municipalities in recent years.

“California’s suit adds to the growing momentum to hold Big Oil accountable for its decades of deception, and secure access to justice for people and communities suffering from fossil-fueled extreme weather and slow onset disasters such as sea level rise,” Kathy Mulvey of the Union of Concerned Scientists said.

Addressing the legal action, California state attorney general Rob Bonta said in a statement that the companies “have fed us lies and mistruths to further their record-breaking profits at the expense of our environment. Enough is enough.”

Allegations in the lawsuit include faulting the companies for creating or contributing to climate change in California, false advertising, damage to natural resources and unlawful business practices for deceiving the public about climate change.

Richard Wiles, president of the Center for Climate Integrity, said in a statement that “California’s decision to take Big Oil companies to court is a watershed moment in the rapidly expanding legal fight to hold major polluters accountable for decades of climate lies ... Californians have been living in a climate emergency caused by the fossil fuel industry, and now the state is taking decisive action to make those polluters pay.”