

CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE FOSSIL FUEL EMPIRE



Dr. Alan K. Betts

Australia is far away, but it has some climate lessons for us. The fire season in the dry southern summer of

2019-2020 was horrifying and bush fires scorched a record 46 million acres, ten times as much as the 2020 California fires which set a new record on our west coast. The vast Siberian fires in 2020 also burnt through a comparable 49 million acres of the Russian landscape.

Australia is a major coal exporter and the burning of coal, a fossil fuel, is accelerating climate change and amplifying wet and dry climate extremes. Russia is also a big exporter of fossil oil and gas. So, Australia and Russia are both responsible for a significant part of their self-destruction, as well as destruction elsewhere. Drought is again spreading across the western U.S. this spring, so watch carefully, since we too have a large fossil fuel industry driving climate change. In Australia just as the wildfire season ended, Covid-19 struck. Remarkably, the Australian government woke up and realized they should act preemptively, which they have not done with the fires. They immediately closed the Australian borders and ordered returning citizens to go into supervised quarantine. This saved the country from a Covid-19 disaster. The U.S. has 13 times the population of Australia, but the U.S. has had 1000 times the number of Covid-19 cases and 600 times the number of deaths. What a difference



The dreadful face of climate change shown by Australia's wildfires in 2019 and 2020. (famvin.org).

leadership can make - if it wakes up.

The climate issues are deeper and facing the climate crisis this decade is critical. Collectively all the fossil fuel interests and their political allies deny responsibility for climate change, saying they are not responsible for the future.

The fossil fuel companies know hundreds of millions of the world's children and grandchildren will die and perhaps a third of the Earth's living species will go extinct over the next fifty years. Exxon has known this for forty years, ever since their own senior scientist, James Black, told them in 1978 how much the climate would warm from doubling CO2. He recommended they change their energy strategy

within ten years. They suppressed his report and for forty years have conspired with the rest of the industry to deceive the public and bribe politicians to prevent government legislation to regulate and phase out the fossil fuels.

This fossil fuel industry conspiracy I have called the Fossil Empire. They are driven by maximizing

current profit and avoiding responsibility for the costs of the accelerating climate disasters that will destroy so much. It is so cheap to bribe U.S. politicians. By a recent count, the 139 Republicans in Congress who publicly deny the science of climate



A protester holding a sign about the climate change denial of ExxonMobil at the protest "Our Generation, Our Choice" in Washington, D.C. on November 10, 2015. (Johnny Silvercloud)

change were paid a total of only \$61M by the coal, oil and gas industries. For less than an average of half a million dollars each, these Republican are happy to lie in public and vote to destroy so much life on Earth. Yet the capitalist framework can easily address the climate crisis by placing a rising price on burning fossil fuels, since we have estimates of the future damage from climate change. The money raised can be used to drive a rapid transition to renewable energy.

Why does the public accept this criminal conspiracy to destroy the Earth for profit? Because they too have been deceived by a second strategy. At first, the Fossil Empire just denied climate change was real, but as climate disasters grew larger, they shifted to the deflection strategy that works so well for industry. Deflection is when you convince the public that it is better to solve a challenging problem by individual action (since it is a free country), rather than by government regulation. Covertly, selling this strategy has been an immense success. Climate activists can be encouraged to discuss and argue over whether one should travel less, buy an electric car, install solar panels, eat a vegetarian diet, have fewer children or live a simpler life. The list is endless. This strategy deflects attention from what needs to be done at the societal level to the individual level, where people can either feel they are taking useful steps, or perhaps instead feel guilty. Of course, individual choices are very important, but they will not fix the huge climate crisis, which needs both national regulation and global agreements to deal with phasing out fossil fuels.

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