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After inspiring climate denial playbook, Big Tobacco now sees dollar signs from climate change

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Despite increasingly dire scientific projections regarding the impact of climate change on humanity, some corporations see a bright side. In a newly released corporate disclosure document, tobacco giant Philip Morris said the higher temperatures and increased rainfall that come with climate change will save the company millions of dollars.

Thousands of corporate disclosures were published by UK-based nonprofit CDP (formerly known as the Carbon Disclosure Project) detailing how companies are preparing for a warmer world and how they expect climate change will impact their bottom line.

According to its disclosure, Philip Morris International expects heavier rains will save the company an estimated $10 million. This is because steady rainfall is the ideal environment for growing tobacco; the longer the soil is moist, the longer tobacco's life cycle. In turn, the company says it would be able to increase production and potentially improve the quality of its cigarettes.

Meanwhile, the tobacco giant expects higher temperatures — which will help with drying out, or curing, the tobacco leaves — will save the company an additional $1 million each year since it won't have to use as much firewood to dry the leaves.

Extreme rainfall and drought could also negatively impact tobacco production in several ways, the company notes in its disclosure, from the need to pump excess water to disruptions to its distribution.

To help combat climate change, the company told CDP that it is working on reducing its carbon footprint by cutting energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions. In return, CDP gave Philip Morris an "A" grade for its efforts on climate change. The company also notes that by advertising its sustainability initiatives it may gain better consumer recognition, enhance its brand image, and "increase the company's competitive advantage."

There is, however, one rather large elephant in the room.

Philip Morris was at the center of an historic lawsuit, United States v. Philip Morris, which, in 2006, resulted in nine tobacco companies and two trade associations being found guilty of lying to the public about the harmful health effects of their products.

In fact, as has been well documented, the industry spent decades pushing misleading and deceptive science and advertisements to claim nicotine wasn't addictive, and that there wasn't a risk of cancer from smoking cigarettes or from being exposed to second-hand smoke. This is despite the industry knowing its products caused cancer since the 1950s.

The tobacco industry's tactics became known as the "tobacco playbook" — a strategy best captured in one industry memo from 1969 that has become infamous for stating, "Doubt is our product."

"Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general product. It is also the means of establishing a controversy," the memo reads.

If this strategy sounds familiar, it's because the fossil fuel industry put it into use a couple decades later.

As investigations by InsideClimate News and the Los Angeles Times revealed in 2015, ExxonMobil knew for decades about the damaging impact of burning fossil fuels — specifically, that its product would cause greenhouse gas emissions to rise and with it, global temperatures.

In fact, according to documents uncovered by DeSmogBlog, the oil giant knew as far back as the late 1970s that "there is no doubt" increasing the use of fossil fuels would increase carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

At the same time, Exxon, along with other fossil fuel giants like Koch Industries and Peabody Energy, have spent millions of dollars in their efforts to promote climate science denial to the general public and to policymakers.

But the efforts of the fossil fuel industry and the tobacco industry are more closely intertwined than just employing the same deceptive strategy.

Many of the same think tanks that have promoted climate science denial also pushed misinformation on tobacco's health impacts; the Heartland Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, for instance, all received both tobacco and fossil fuel industry funding.

The two industries also shared scientists and public relations firms to help promote their misleading narratives. Documents found by the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) show that oil and tobacco's ties go back decades. Both industries hired PR firm Hill & Knowlton Inc. as early as 1956.

One memo revealed by CIEL, for instance, authored by an unnamed individual from Standard Oil Co. Inc. of New Jersey recommended scientists for an advisory committee to study the health effects of smoking. The documents also revealed that a mathematics professor who, in 1962, studied lead in gasoline for Ethyl Corp. — a joint venture between General Motors Corp. and Standard Oil (the precursor to Exxon) — was also paid $200,000 in the 1990s by Philip Morris for his work.

In other words, the tobacco industry made denial and doubt a cornerstone strategy to promote a harmful product. This playbook was subsequently adopted by the fossil fuel industry. Many of the same individuals worked for both industries. And like Philip Morris, ExxonMobil is currently facing multiple lawsuits to determine whether it deceived investors and the public about climate change.

Meanwhile, temperatures are rising and the devastating impacts of climate change are everywhere — from stronger, wetter storms to catastrophic wildfires. And some of these climate impacts, Philip Morris says, will be profitable for the tobacco industry.

Philip Morris isn't the only corporation eyeing potential profits. Disclosure after disclosure released by CDP shows companies grappling with the impacts of climate change to their businesses. While many recognize that it could disrupt supply chains and the distribution of their products, or that new emission regulations mean higher compliance costs, many also see an opportunity.

Pharmaceutical giant Merck says climate change will create "expanded markets for products for tropical and weather related diseases." Home Depot says it will help it sell more air conditioners. And Apple predicts climate change will allow it to sell more iPhones, since they double as flashlights and sirens, can be used as a radio, and can be charged with hand cranks.

The ironic — or perhaps more accurately, infuriating — aspect of Big Tobacco once again seeing dollar signs amid a global crisis is that it seems as if, decades later, things are right back where they started.