



Ford And GM Lied. The Planet Died. Part One

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Okay, right up front. The actions of one or two companies did not cause the wildfires in California this year or the melting permafrost in the Arctic all by themselves. They didn't make the oceans rise or cause the desertification of some portions of the Earth. No, they are part of a larger picture, one that involves everyone on Earth who has ever driven a gasoline or diesel powered vehicle, heated a home in winter, used electricity to cook food, or flown to across the ocean. So we can't say those companies caused global warming all by themselves.

What we can say is that General Motors and Ford employed respected scientists on their staffs who warned them way back in the 1950s that carbon dioxide spewing out of the tailpipes of their products would likely lead to a warming planet. For a while, senior executives of both companies believed aerosols emitted by their internal combustion engines would have a cooling effect equal to the warming caused by carbon dioxide. Think of it as an early form of geoengineering.

Thanks to an exhaustive analysis by [E&E News](#), we now know that when they learned the truth — that their products contributed significantly to global warming — both companies shut down further research into the matter and began contributing heavily to climate change denial organizations like the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute, and the US Chamber of Commerce. Those same organizations also received major financial support from the oil industry, especially ExxonMobil. In other words, once they found out the truth, they lied through their teeth to their customers, their workers, the American public, and government regulators about the harm carbon dioxide could do to the environment.

The *E&E News* investigation included conversations with several scientists who previously worked for General Motors and Ford and examined publicly available documents pertaining to both companies. Their work shows that once the two companies realized their vehicles were harmful to the environment, they worked tirelessly to keep that information hidden from the public.

Our mission is not to reproduce the entire *E&E News* report here. Our goal is to share just enough of it with you that you will want to go read it for yourself. Although Ford and GM both say they are committed to building zero emission vehicles today, the truth is they have resisted doing so for decades. Had the United States taken the lead on climate change 30 years ago, the cuts to carbon dioxide emissions to keep the planet from dangerously overheating would have been about 3% a year or less — something that was easily doable if the political will was there.

Now that the climate catastrophe is upon us, humans will need to cut carbon emissions by more than 10% a year to get to net zero by 2030 — an almost impossible task. And every year's delay from now on just makes the task that much harder. Ford, to its credit, said “no thank you” to a government bailout after the last Republican led collapse of the economy in 2008. GM was right there with its hand out begging for taxpayer money. Now it is going to rectify its long history of climate denial by building a **\$112,000 electric Hummer**? Oh, please. Get real, people. That's like Exxon trumpeting its research into biofuels from algae. It's eye wash designed to bamboozle the weak minded and nothing more.

The Global Climate Commission

E&E News says in 1989, GM and Ford joined the **Global Climate Coalition**, a group opposed to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions during the George H.W. Bush administration. Bear in mind this was after **Dr. James Hansen** gave his now famous testimony to Congress warning that that emissions of greenhouse gases from human activity were responsible for global warming. The other members of the coalition represented a variety of fossil fuel-dependent industries, including the American Petroleum Institute, Edison Electric Institute, National Association of Manufacturers, and Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association.

One of that group's main objectives was to prevent Bush from setting specific emissions reduction targets at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. After Bush did as he was told and Bill Clinton was elected, its next goal was to block Clinton from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, an international climate deal that committed developed countries to curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

“Unfortunately, it was clear that the GCC was intent on putting out false information about the state of climate change science,” says Paul Bledsoe, who served as director of communications for the White House Climate Change Task Force during the Clinton administration. He is now a strategic adviser with the Progressive Policy Institute. “And of course, this was of great concern to the White House as we tried to make the case for climate action.”

Meet Ruth Reck

Ruth Reck graduated from Minnesota State University in 1954, the youngest person ever to do so. Afterward, she went on to obtain a doctorate in physical chemistry from the University of Minnesota before taking a job at General Motors in its research department. A week after she started at GM, she met Marvin Goldberger, who later became president of the California Institute of Technology. He encouraged her to study climate change. With approval from her supervisors, she did just that. Beginning in the late 60s, she started studying aerosols — the tiny particles that can come from automobiles, power plants, and factories. Today we call them **fine particulate matter**. Officials at GM believed her research would show aerosols have a significant cooling effect on the atmosphere, canceling out the warming effect of carbon dioxide.

They thought aerosols “might actually negate the effects of the CO₂ coming off. And so they were positively thinking that maybe the use of fossil fuels by the automobile could be neutral,” Reck tells *E&E News* but her findings showed otherwise. “Of course, that didn't happen at all,”

she said. “First of all, their lifetime is very short, whereas CO₂ is very, very long. ... It didn’t play out at all the way they wanted it to happen.” Nevertheless, GM allowed Reck to publish her research in several peer reviewed scientific journals.

Reck recalls warning her colleagues that higher temperatures in the Arctic could cause ice sheets to melt, which could trigger sea-level rise and other serious consequences. “It’s all a question of perspective, whether you think ... melting all the ice in the northern regions is bad or not. And I said, ‘Because it disturbs the entire globe and it disturbs what food we can grow and everything else and the whole balance of the entire Earth atmosphere system, yes, I think it is bad.’” How eerily prescient.

Jimmy Johnston

James “Jimmy” Johnston was GM’s top lobbyist in Washington for many years. He forged a close relationship with Reck and he became deeply interested in her research. In 2011, he was interviewed by Sandra Rothenberg, a professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and David Levy, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Boston for a paper they were writing entitled “Corporate Perceptions of Climate Science: The Role of Corporate Environmental Scientists.”

Johnston told the professors that GM environmental scientists “were very influential in putting the [climate] issues on the agenda,” adding that Reck “pushed what was really important, and was one of the more energetic people.” Reck later presented her findings to Roger Smith, who became chairman and CEO of GM in 1981, and Robert “Bob” Stempel, who succeeded Smith in 1990. “We would sit down and they would look at the papers, and I would explain to them what they were looking at,” she said, adding, “They were aware of things that were going on.”

The Same Story At Ford

Ruth Reck’s counterpart at Ford was Gilbert Plass, who graduated from Harvard before earning a doctorate in physics at Princeton. He went to work at a member of Ford’s research staff in 1956. That year, he published an article in **American Scientist** entitled “Carbon Dioxide and the Climate” and a 1956 paper in the journal **Tellus** entitled “The Carbon Dioxide Theory of Climatic Change.” Both pieces claimed that humans were responsible for heating the Earth since 1900 by burning fossil fuels and pumping massive quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere.

At Ford, Plass was based in the Aeronutronic Division in Newport Beach, California, which focused on aerospace and defense issues. But he continued to study CO₂, using Ford’s computers to run early climate models and publishing his findings in peer-reviewed scientific journals. In 1960, Plass became manager of the research lab in Ford’s theoretical physics department. The following year, he wrote a **letter to the editor** of **Tellus** that argued, “[m]any of the climatic changes which have occurred over the past several billion years of the earth’s history can readily be explained by variations of the atmospheric CO₂ amount.”

“In recent years the burning of fossil fuels has added 10¹⁰ tons per year of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. It is predicted that this figure will increase to 5 x 10¹⁰ tons per year by the year 2000,” Plass wrote. “If all of this carbon dioxide remains in the atmosphere ... [t]his would cause

a temperature rise of 1.1°C per century,” he wrote. Once again, a very prescient observation. His prediction corresponds almost exactly with the the amount of global heating that has occurred to date.

Plass’ findings reached the highest levels of the U.S. scientific community. The Environmental Pollution Panel of President Johnson’s Science Advisory Committee cited three of his articles in a 1965 report which predicted that the burning of fossil fuels would cause CO2 concentrations to increase by roughly 25% in 2000 and lead to melting of the Antarctic ice cap and sea level rise. Those who express surprise that such things are happening are simply willfully ignoring information that was publicly available nearly 5 decades ago.

Part of the reason for that sorry state of affairs [there are many, including the nefarious activities of **Charles Koch and ExxonMobil**], is the deliberate refusal by Ford and General Motors to act responsibly on the information about carbon dioxide and climate change known to their own scientists. We will explore how the companies obscured and obfuscated that knowledge in Part Two of this story.