

## **Exxon Continues to Fund ‘Science’ Group Steeped in Climate Denial and Delay**

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June 26, 2019

ExxonMobil is funding a little-known nonprofit that calls itself a “pro-science advocacy organization,” but whose scientific advisory board includes several renowned climate deniers and has worked for decades to sow doubt about the health impacts of climate change.

Records show the ExxonMobil Foundation provided grants of at least \$60,000 in both 2017 and 2018 to the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), a group that says its mission is to “publicly support evidence-based science and medicine.”

Members of the ACSH scientific advisory board, however, include a who’s who of climate deniers, including Patrick J. Michaels, who has worked for more than 30 years on behalf of the fossil fuel industry; S. Fred Singer, who last year wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal falsely claiming that sea level rise is not caused by climate change; and William Happer, a current member of President Trump’s National Security Council who as recently as 2016 argued that carbon dioxide is not a pollutant.

Documents recently revealed in an investigation by The Guardian show ExxonMobil’s current funding of the ACSH began prior to 1999, when Exxon and Mobil merged to become Exxon Mobil Corporation, one of the largest oil companies in the world.

“ACSH is a front group for libertarian billionaires, fossil fuel companies, and basically every other industry selling dangerous products,” said Geoffrey Supran, a Harvard University researcher who in 2017 published a study that showed how Exxon’s internal memos take the climate issue seriously while its public communications emphasize doubt about the science.

ACSH has also defended fracking as safe for the environment, denied the dangers of bisphenol-A (BPA) and opposed efforts to limit sugar in sodas, among other pro-industry stances.

Corporations fund nonprofits, think tanks and trade groups, many of which are “dark money” organizations that do not disclose their donors to the public, to further their interests without directly being tied to the groups’ work.

“This is just one more example of how these large corporations use third-party organizations to convey their message without being directly connected to them,” said Drexel University environmental sociologist Robert Brulle, who is now a visiting professor of environment and society at Brown University.

“It fits exactly with the kind of stuff ExxonMobil has done for years and years—this is exactly their strategy,” said Brulle, who has studied the funding patterns of organizations connected to

climate denial. “The question is what is still going on and why does Exxon still have its connection to this group after all these years?”

In addition to its questionable science advisory board, the ACSH board of trustees includes Fred L. Smith, founder of the conservative think tank Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) and current director of CEI’s Center for Advancing Capitalism.

In a bit of irony, Exxon said in 2006 it would stop funding CEI (which it had given nearly \$2 million between 1998-2005) because of its work denying climate change, but it continued to fund ACSH at least through 2018, the last year for which data is available.

ExxonMobil’s current funding of ACSH is a continuation of a relationship that goes back decades.

Prior to merging in 1999, Exxon and Mobil both funded the ACSH, according to internal Mobil Foundation documents, which include a list of potential grant recipients as well as Mobil’s justification for the funding decision. They reveal that the Mobil Foundation provided at least \$125,000 in grants to the ACSH between 1981-93 and funding was expected to continue into 1994.

The Mobil Foundation recommended continuing to provide funding to the ACSH in part because “the Council has achieved high credibility and recognition in the media and scientific community, as evidenced by wide publication of their positions in the press and scientific journals.”

It’s unclear what the most recent ExxonMobil Foundation grants were used for, but Alex Berezow, vice president of scientific affairs for ACSH, said they weren’t designated for any specific research or project.

“Our policy for the past several years precludes us from doing specific research in exchange for corporate grants,” Berezow said.

Since its founding in 1978, the ACSH has worked to promote corporate positions on science, most often taking the position that chemicals are not a threat to humans or the environment.

“It’s a quintessential anti-science astroturf in the fossil fuel industry’s web of denial and delay—this is an organization founded by money from libertarian ideologues like the Scaifes, Olins, and Kochs,” Supran said. “Unsurprisingly therefore, ACSH’s rhetoric on the climate crisis since the 1990’s has masterfully complemented the talking points of its fossil fuel funders, including Exxon, Mobil, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, and the American Petroleum Institute.”

### **Exxon, Mobil and “The Great Defender of Petrochemical Companies”**

ACSH was founded in 1978 by Elizabeth Whelan, a public health scientist with postgraduate degrees from Yale and Harvard, who died in 2014. She wanted to counteract the work of environmental and consumer advocacy groups, which she said were not using sound science about the dangers of products to the environment and public health. “We help policymakers see past scaremongers and activist groups who have targeted GMOs, vaccines, conventional agriculture, nuclear power, natural gas, and ‘chemicals,’ while peddling health scares and fad diets,” the ACSH website says.

It's unknown whether Exxon and Mobil's funding was used for a specific project or research, but the ACSH grant was recommended by Mobil's public relations department, which said Whelan's work was a major benefit to the company.

Whelan's description of the ACSH was much more candid. In a 1992 memo, she referred to the organization as "the great defender of petrochemical companies."

In a 1998 article titled, *Global Warming Not Health Threat*, Whelan wrote that climate science is "is rife with uncertainty as are the allegations for the health effects" and climate change models are "far from perfect."

"As for the hypothetical health effects that are based on the alleged global warming, these predictions are even more dubious," wrote Whelan, adding that limiting greenhouse gas emissions could worsen human health in developing countries.

Supran said ACSH vociferously promoted Mobil's position that addressing climate change would result in severe adverse economic impacts and increase poverty.

"ACSH was and is a talking head, amplifying the fossil fuel industry's narrative while maintaining the false pretense of an "independent" voice," Supran said. "Their rhetoric faithfully echoed Mobil's key themes of doubt: that global warming is not real and human-caused, not serious, and not solvable."

ExxonMobil did not respond to a request for comment.

### **Wanted: Studies to "Put Climate Change Health Hazards in Perspective"**

It was at the urging of Mobil that the Global Climate Coalition (GCC), a fossil fuel industry-backed group that worked from 1989 to 2002 to strategically undermine international climate negotiations, looked to the ACSH for help downplaying the potential health effects of climate change.

By the mid-1990's, the GCC and its fossil fuel members, including many ACSH funders, had become concerned about the growing body of research suggesting climate change could cause serious health impacts.

Exxon scientists Dennis Devlin and Barry Friedlander presented a summary of published literature on the health impacts of climate change during a September 1996 meeting of the Global Climate Coalition's Science and Technology Assessment Committee.

The presentation emphasized "key knowledge gaps" and "advocated critical evaluation of models and ongoing studies to put climate change health hazards in perspective."

After the presentation, the GCC meeting attendees discussed the findings and brainstormed "ways of encouraging a more balanced scientific evaluation of this concern."

To provide that "balance," Lenny Bernstein of Mobil suggested Whelan and the ACSH.

Bernstein told the group that Whelan was considering an "independent assessment on the climate change and health issue." He also noted that many of the Global Climate Coalition's member companies financially support the ACSH and urged them to contact her to suggest she write an assessment.

“The health issue is increasing in importance with the climate change issue, as with other environmental issues,” wrote the Global Climate Coalition in meeting minutes from January 1997. “The GCC has got to be prepared to respond to the issue this year.”

Disregarding the growing body of research indicating otherwise, the GCC in early 1997 wrote in a position paper that “attempting to link global climate change and adverse health impacts requires a long and very tenuous stretch.” The group downplayed the work of a 1995 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—an intergovernmental body of the United Nations that includes the world’s leading climate scientists—writing “concerns that climate change might be the cause of various health problems rests on a number of unproved assumptions.”

The Global Climate Coalition also provided the ACSH with a two-part grant to study the health effects of climate change.

The study, however, would be anything but independent.

By early summer 1997, the GCC had reviewed a draft of the report and suggested edits. The ACSH then began working on a rewritten draft to be reviewed by GCC committee members.

It’s unclear if that report was ever published, but later that year the ACSH published “Global climate change and human health.”

As the GCC had hoped, the report downplayed the views of mainstream science and said “implementation of current proposals for mitigation measures—measures to stabilize the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere—would be both costly and ineffective.”

Brulle said corporations and industry groups like the GCC use organizations like the ACSH to add a “veneer of legitimacy.”

“This really fits directly into this whole strategy of third party spokespersons, taking your point, but not attributing it to you, it’s attributed to an ‘independent’ organization,” Brulle said.

The ACSH report did not disclose its funders, but concluded that “policymakers can safely take several decades to plan a response, and scientists will have enough time to develop cost-effective anti-climate-change strategies.”

When asked if the published report was funded by the Global Climate Coalition or if another report was published, Berezow said he did not know.

“Anyone who would know the answer to that question is either deceased or retired,” he said.

### **ACSH Benefits to ExxonMobil: Denial and Delay**

After years of scrutiny, ExxonMobil has stopped funding some of the more vocal climate deniers and organizations. In addition to dropping CEI, the oil giant has ended its membership in the American Legislative Exchange Council and has said it no longer funds the Cato Institute, the Heartland Institute and the Institute for Energy Research, all organizations that are heavily industry-influenced and have worked for years to deny climate change and delay the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions.

But ExxonMobil continues to fund the ACSH despite the organization's position that "climate change is a slow-moving threat whose consequences are in the medium- to long-term future, not the near-term."

"We typically only talk about climate change tangentially. For instance, we support Generation IV nuclear power because, among many other things, it helps reduce carbon emissions," Berezow said, adding that the organization's main focus is on biomedical science and public health.

Brulle said while using third-party spokespeople and groups like the ACSH isn't new, ExxonMobil's continued relationship is notable.

"I do find it a little surprising that ExxonMobil would be cozy enough to be directly connected to this group," Brulle said.

Supran said ACSH continues to be an excellent investment for ExxonMobil.

"In a 2016 ACSH article promoting the authority of discredited and debunked climate deniers and delayers, for instance, ExxonMobil's funding fingerprints are nowhere to be found," Supran said, referring to *Meet the Scientific Outcasts and Mavericks*, which was authored by Berezow.

In *Are The 'Green 20' Suppressing Scientific Dissent?*, posted in 2017, then-ACSH president Hank Campbell, critiqued the New York attorney general's office for its investigation of ExxonMobil for possibly deceiving its investors on the risks of climate change.

In another, *Al Gore: Still Demented After All These Years*, Berezow said in 2017 that the world's biggest health problem is poverty, not climate change. "When it comes to human disease, climate change is mostly a distraction. Eliminating poverty will do far more to save people's lives than lowering the temperature a notch," Berezow said.

Nowhere on the ACSH website is ExxonMobil's funding acknowledged.

"As it's grown more publicly untenable for companies themselves to publicly deny basic science, front groups like ACSH help do their dirty work," said Supran, adding that the ACSH is a prime example of how ExxonMobil's denial and delay continue through increasingly veiled initiatives.

"ACSH's faux-scientific calls for 'evidence-based science' and its fixation on false dichotomies between meaningful climate action on the one hand, and poverty reduction and economic growth on the other, align with, extend, and amplify ExxonMobil's own talking points," he said. "The rhetoric has shifted an inch, but it's just a rose by any other name—the goal is the same: inaction."