

The Washington Times

Shell Oil accused of ignoring climate threat known in 1991

Valerie Richardson

March 2, 2017

The #ExxonKnew campaign never quite panned out as climate change activists had hoped, unless their goal was to see Exxon Mobil CEO Rex W. Tillerson sworn in as secretary of state. But that failure wasn't enough to stop #ShellKnew.

Shell Oil came under fire this week from environmentalists after a Dutch blogger unearthed a 1991 video, "Climate of Concern," produced by Shell warning of the possible consequences of climate change, prompting accusations that the company chose to ignore the situation in order to maximize profits.

In a post on the Dutch website the Correspondent, 350.org founder Bill McKibben said Shell "took a good long look at climate change. And then went back to looking for oil."

"The reason for that endless deceit is clear," Mr. McKibben said. "The early shock about global warming soon gave way, at Shell and other powerful institutions, to a more urgent fear: the fear that something might endanger next quarter's profits."

The Correspondent's Jelmer Mommers, who obtained and posted the 28-minute film on his website, said, "The question, ladies and gentlemen, is what did Shell know and when did they know it."

Greenpeace activist Desiree Llanos Dee said in a statement, "Exxon knew. Shell knew. "Now we must get to the bottom of what other fossil majors know and what they plan to do to avert catastrophic climate change."

Katie Brown, spokeswoman for the industry group Energy in Depth, dismissed #ShellKnew as a politically motivated stunt.

"With their campaign in shambles, activists are desperately trying to hit the reset button. But this effort against Shell isn't going anywhere," Ms. Brown said in a statement.

She said the video, which credits government groups such as the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and the Netherlands Information Service, shows that Shell “worked publicly with scientific and government organizations to address climate change.”

That cooperation “runs completely counter to the narrative being peddled by activists,” she said.

The #ShellKnew premise — that an energy company ignored or obfuscated its own research on climate change — was pioneered in #ExxonKnew, a campaign aimed at showing that the company ignored its own research in order to defy the climate “consensus.”

The effort started strong with an investigation launched in November 2015 by New York Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman, who formed a coalition of 17 other prosecutors to probe Exxon’s involvement in discrediting the climate change narrative.

But #ExxonKnew veered off course amid accusations of behind-the-scenes collaboration involving Democratic attorneys general, liberal foundations and environmentalists. Any doubt that #ExxonKnew had fallen short in its bid were erased when Mr. Tillerson’s nomination was approved Feb. 1 in a 56-43 Senate vote.

Nearly a year later, only New York and Massachusetts are still involved with the #ExxonKnew investigation. The Virgin Islands attorney general wound up closing his probe and withdrawing his subpoenas under legal challenges from Exxon and the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

Even so, the fallout from #ExxonKnew continues. In a Tuesday letter, 15 Democratic attorneys general urged House Republicans to withdraw subpoenas against Mr. Schneiderman and Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Haley related to their Exxon probes.

The prosecutors are also embroiled in litigation with Exxon, which has accused the Democrats of abusing their authority as elected officials by pursuing politically motivated probes.

Emails obtained through open records searches by E&E Legal Institute last year showed that two environmental groups briefed the attorneys general before their March 29 press conference announcing their 17-member coalition, AGs United for Clean Power.

Meanwhile, the Rockefeller Family Fund has taken credit for reaching out to the attorneys general and funding journalism entities such as InsideClimate News and the Columbia School of Journalism, both of which wrote #ExxonKnew exposes in 2015.

Both journalism entities have maintained their independence and insisted that their investigations were not undertaken at the behest of donors.

Chip Knappenberger, assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the free market Cato Institute, disputed the idea that Shell or Exxon was aware of greenhouse gases before the rest of the world.

Serious research on carbon dioxide emissions and their “greenhouse” effects was well underway decades before the 1991 Shell video was produced, he said.

“I remain flummoxed by this whole #ExxonKnew, #ShellKnew campaign, because everybody knew,” said Mr. Knappenberger. “What people don’t know, and where opinions have changed over time as new science comes in, is over the magnitude and impact of climate change that might result.”

The narrator of the Shell video speaks ominously about the dangers posed by rising carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but also couches them as conjecture, not fact.

“What the computer modelers are looking at is the possibility of change at a rate faster than at any time since the end of the ice age,” says the video. “Change too fast perhaps for life to adapt, without severe dislocation.”

Shell responded with a statement emphasizing its climate change work, saying, “Our position on climate change is well known; recognizing the climate challenge and the role energy has in enabling a decent quality of life.”

“If you look at climate change, and what is going to happen, our position has been very clear and has not changed,” Shell CEO Ben van Beurden said in a Feb. 3 presentation. “We believe that climate change is real, and we believe that action will be needed. We believe that we are in the middle of an energy transition that is unstoppable and we want to be in the vanguard of that.”

Mr. Knappenberger pointed out that the video is 26 years old. “The fact that Shell had some sort of video released in 1991 — does that mean they’re bound to stick by everything that’s in that video from 26 years ago?” he asked. “Science changes, opinions evolve.”

He also challenged the implication that Exxon and Shell hid the information. Most of the Exxon documents, produced in conjunction with the Energy Department and others, came from its archives at the University of Texas at Austin, said Exxon spokesman Alan T. Jeffers.

“To suggest that we had reached definitive conclusions, decades before the world’s experts and while climate science was in an early stage of development, is not credible,” Mr. Jeffers said.

Climate change groups have argued that the companies should have reacted by embracing green energy, but Mr. Knappenberger argued that the hotly contested climate change debate doesn’t lend itself to an obvious policy outcome.

“If anything, these early videos and memos show that they were aware of the issue, they were looking at the issue from the very beginning,” he said. “But what kind of action that meant they needed to take — one doesn’t follow from the other.”