



Now that we know what Exxon knew, what should Exxon do?

It confirmed global warming in private, so it needs to go public.

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By now you should know what Exxon knew and when it knew it. Based on reporting by the Los Angeles Times, Inside Climate News, and the Energy and Environment Reporting Project at Columbia University, it's clear that Exxon's own scientists had confirmed by the late 1980s the serious problem of global warming caused by carbon emissions, but the company in public chose to "emphasize the uncertainty." Even the Dallas Morning News, Exxon's hometown newspaper, reported thoroughly on the scandal this week.

As a member of the Star Tribune Editorial Board during the 1990s, I received reports from the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) and the World Climate Report, edited by Patrick Michaels, then the state climatologist of Virginia, now at the Cato Institute. Filled with information, charts and graphs that debunked or questioned other scientists' work, the reports pointed out contrary "evidence" and mocked the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), set up in 1988 by the United Nations to develop the best science to help governments and the public respond.

I read those critical documents seriously, as my job was to render what the science was saying into fact-based recommendations for readers to evaluate.

I was horrified, therefore, to discover soon enough that the GCC and the World Climate Report were not legitimate scientific bodies, but Potemkin villages of partisans funded by the fossil-fuel industry and, at the time, the auto industry, to market misleading information in order to slow public understanding that fossil-fuel emissions cause climate change. Exxon was a charter member of the GCC and among the corporations that supported it the longest. (The GCC collapsed in 2002.)

Some are calling for a criminal investigation of Exxon. I doubt that lying to the public is a crime, though Exxon may have had a legal obligation to shareholders to report on risks to its business model.

But defending one's business against threats is what businesses generally do. We expect that. What we do not expect, nor should we condone, is public propaganda. And that is what this was — a Goebbels-style campaign of public deception, one that proved shockingly effective at stalling significant climate action until, as is widely expected, global climate accords are signed in Paris this December, 25 years later.

What should Exxon have done? Pointed out that fossil fuels are a global market, with Saudi Arabia's hand on the spigot, and that constraining carbon emissions requires a global solution. That would have

meant supporting the deliberations and conclusions of the IPCC and endorsing carbon cap and trade, or carbon fee and dividend, with border tariff adjustments to avoid exporting carbon pollution, instead of undermining those policies in public and behind the political curtain.

The good news, and it is good, is that current CEO Rex Tillerson has publicly endorsed a carbon tax, or fee, saying in 2009 that “a carbon tax is also the most efficient means of reflecting the cost of carbon in all economic decisions — from investments made by companies to fuel their requirements to the product choices made by consumers.”

He is right. Now the public has a right to expect that, in private as well as in public, Exxon will support the politics as well as the policies to bring about such a tax or fee, to efficiently bend the curve of carbon pollution away from climate calamity and turn Exxon toward becoming a global energy, not just a fossil energy, company.