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Exxon's Climate Concealment

By **NAOMI ORESKES** OCT. 9, 2015

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. — MILLIONS of Americans once wanted to smoke. Then they came to understand how deadly tobacco products were. Tragically, that understanding was long delayed because the tobacco industry worked for decades to hide the truth, promoting a message of scientific uncertainty instead.

The same thing has happened with climate change, as Inside Climate News, a nonprofit news organization, has been reporting in a series of articles based on internal documents from Exxon Mobil dating from the 1970s and interviews with former company scientists and employees.

Had Exxon been upfront at the time about the dangers of the greenhouse gases we were spewing into the atmosphere, we might have begun decades ago to develop a less carbon-intensive energy path to avert the worst impacts of a changing climate. Amazingly, politicians are still debating the reality of this threat, thanks in no small part to industry disinformation.

Government and academic scientists alerted policy makers to the potential threat of human-driven climate change in the 1960s and '70s, but at that time climate change was still a prediction. By the late 1980s it had become an observed fact.

But Exxon was sending a different message, even though its own evidence contradicted its public claim that the science was highly uncertain and no one really knew whether the climate was changing or, if it was changing, what was causing it.

Exxon (which became Exxon Mobil in 1999) was a leader in these campaigns of confusion. In 1989, the company helped to create the Global Climate Coalition to question the scientific basis for concern about climate change and prevent the United States from signing on to the international Kyoto Protocol to control greenhouse gas emissions. The coalition disbanded in 2002, but the disinformation continued. Journalists and scientists have identified more than 30 different organizations funded by the company that have worked to undermine the scientific message and prevent policy action to control greenhouse gas emissions.

These efforts turned the problem from a matter of fact into a matter of opinion. When the Exxon chief executive, Lee Raymond, insisted in the late 1990s that the science was still uncertain, the media covered it, business leaders accepted it and the American people were confused.

For people close to the issue, it was never credible that Exxon — a company that employs thousands of scientists and engineers and whose core business depends on their expertise — could be that confused about the science. We now know that they not only understood the science, but contributed to it.

As early as 1977, one of Exxon's senior scientists warned a gathering of oilmen of a "general scientific agreement" that the burning of fossil fuels was influencing the climate. A year later, he had updated his assessment, warning that "present thinking holds that man has a time window of five to 10 years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical."

In the 1980s, Exxon scientists collaborated with academic and government researchers to build climate models and understand their implications. When one researcher expressed the opinion that the impacts would be "well short of catastrophic," the director of the Theoretical and Mathematical Sciences Laboratory at Exxon Research responded in a memo, "I think that this statement may be too reassuring." He said it was "distinctly possible" that the projected warming trend after 2030 "will indeed be catastrophic (at least for a substantial fraction of the earth's population)," a conclusion that most climate scientists now hold, assuming we continue business as usual.

What did Exxon executives do with this information? Until 1989, they circulated

reports summarizing it inside the company. They allowed their scientists to attend academic meetings, to participate in panels, and to publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals — in short, to behave as scientists. And they did acknowledge the “potentially catastrophic events that must be considered.”

Then corporate executives turned about face. As the scientific community began to speak out more strongly, first about the risks of unmitigated climate change and then about the fact that it was underway, Exxon executives and organizations funded by them embarked on a campaign designed to prevent governments from taking meaningful action. These activities continue today.

Exxon (whose spokesman has disputed the Inside Climate News reporting) had a choice. As one of the most profitable companies in the world, Exxon could have acted as a corporate leader, helping to explain to political leaders, to shareholders and institutional investors, and to the public what it knew about climate change. It could have begun to shift its business model, investing in renewables and biofuels or introducing a major research and development initiative in carbon capture. It could have endorsed sensible policies to foster a profitable transition to a 21st-century energy economy.

Instead — like the tobacco industry — Exxon chose the path of disinformation, denial and delay. More damagingly, the company set a model for the rest of the industry. More than 30 years ago, Exxon scientists acknowledged in internal company memos that climate change could be catastrophic. Today, scientists who say the exact same thing are ridiculed in the business community and on the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal.

We have lost precious time as a result: decades during which we could have built a smart electricity grid, fostered efficiency and renewables and generated thousands of jobs in a cleaner, greener economy. There is still time to prevent the worst disruptions of human-driven climate change, but the challenge is now much greater than it needed to be, in no small part because of the choices that Exxon Mobil made.

Naomi Oreskes is a professor of the history of science at Harvard and the author, with Erik M. Conway, of “The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View From the Future.”

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