

# GREENWASHING BIG OIL & GAS:

## THE FOSSIL FUEL DECEPTION PLAYBOOK



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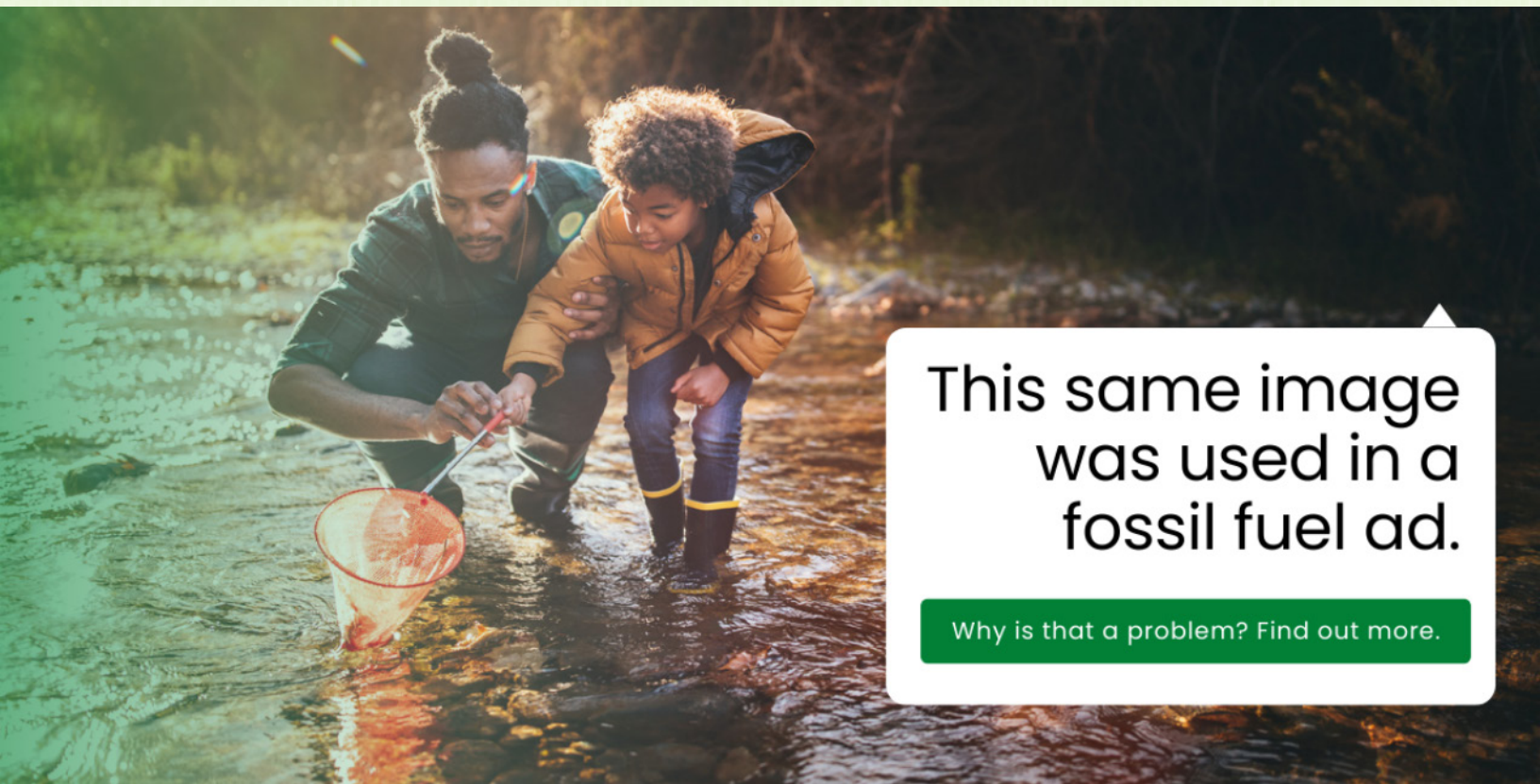
The fossil fuel industry has a [long and dirty history of greenwashing](#) its harmful operations, but these tactics are taking on new life in the shadow of the climate emergency. As people increasingly demand urgent climate action, oil and gas companies are doubling down on new types of deceitful [advertising designed to mislead you](#) into thinking that they are making the changes needed to protect our planet—but they're not.

**Part One** of this report, Greenwashing Big Oil & gas: the fossil fuel deception playbook, sheds light on seven common greenwashing strategies the fossil fuel industry uses to try to fool the public into thinking its practices are eco-friendly. After defining greenwashing and explaining why it has become Big Oil's favourite marketing strategy, the report identifies seven common greenwashing strategies and breaks down:

- how to recognize the strategies
- where you've seen them in Canada and internationally;
- cases currently under investigation; and
- examples of governments busting companies' greenwash claims and ordering them to retract false advertisements.

**Part Two** of this report is a toolkit, *[Take Action Against Fossil Fuel Greenwashing: Reporting to Advertising Standards](#)* and the Competition Bureau of Canada. After learning how to identify industry's marketing sleight of hand, the toolkit will help consumers report greenwashing ads to Canada's regulatory bodies. The more complaints about these deceptive practices received by regulators, the more likely it is that such disinformation will be taken down and that these regulators will take action to stamp out greenwashing.

Created by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE). Imagery of people outdoors or in other seemingly natural settings is a common tactic used in fossil fuel advertising to greenwash brands and products. See tactic #6 of this toolkit for more information.



This same image  
was used in a  
fossil fuel ad.

Why is that a problem? Find out more.





## Definition: Fossil Fuels

We consider the fossil fuel industry to include not just oil and gas producers, but other businesses with a vested interest in keeping our economy hooked on fossil fuels. This report examines greenwashing by a range of these players, including:

- Gas utilities like Enbridge, Fortis and Énergir;
- Fossil fuel producers like Shell and Exxon;
- Car companies like Kia and Volkswagen;
- Aviation companies like Frontier and Lufthansa;
- Industry associations and lobby groups working on behalf of the above interests, such as Pathways Alliance and the Canadian Gas Association.

Advertising is a powerful factor shaping people's ideas about the urgency of adopting climate solutions. Greenwashing can be found all around us: television commercials, social media posts, websites, company materials, sponsorship promotions, billboards, advertorials (a newspaper ad taking the form of an opinion piece or article) and so many other platforms. This marketing spin informs how people understand the dangers posed by fossil fuels as well as how media outlets cover the industry and shape climate narratives.

## SHAPING THE CONVERSATION

### Did you know?

Fossil fuel companies were the first to popularize the idea of a personal carbon footprint. Oil company BP spent \$100 million per year between 2004-2006 to push this notion, which places responsibility firmly in the hands of individuals and away from major polluting industries.

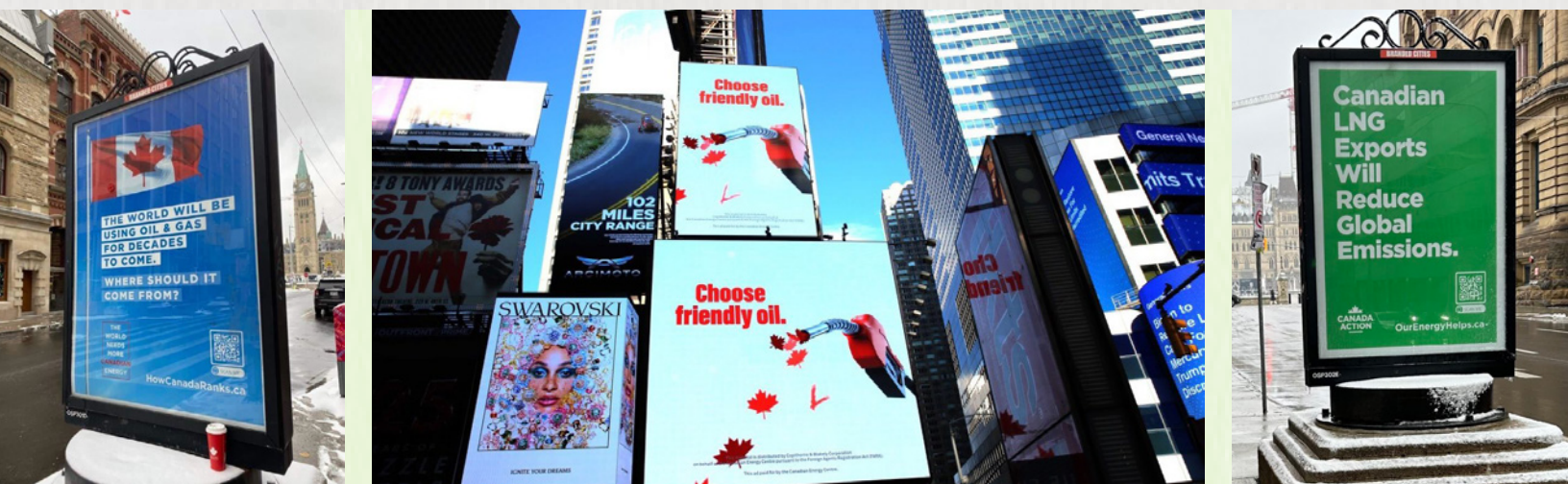


Image 1: Canada Action advertisement photographed by CAPE staff member in downtown Ottawa, April 2023. The advertiser, Canada Action, claims to be a "grassroots" advocacy organization, but a 2020 investigation by [The Narwhal](#) reveals it received \$100,000 from a fossil fuel company and have [deep ties](#) to the oil and gas industry.

Image 2: Choose Friendly Oil campaign by the Canadian Energy Centre [launched](#) in the US in September, 2021.

Image 3: Advertisement in Ottawa, posted on Canada Action's X ([formerly Twitter](#)) [account](#).

# SO WHAT IS GREENWASHING?

**Greenwashing is when a company makes misleading, untrue, or unsupported statements to depict themselves as environmentally friendly** or to pose as climate leaders. Meanwhile, its actions and investments continue to threaten the environment and worsen climate change. It's a corporate marketing tactic used when the company's words don't match their actions.

The term "greenwashing" was [coined](#) in 1986 by environmentalist Jay Westerveld to denounce the hotel industry's "save the towel" initiatives. These initiatives, which persist today, ask guests to help protect the environment by reusing their towels. Vacationers are thus presented with a well-crafted image of the hotels as environmentally conscious when, in reality, the hotels are mostly cutting down on laundry costs without engaging in meaningful sustainability efforts.

The **tell-tale signs of greenwash** typically involve big promises without much evidence to back them up ("we're helping to save the planet"), vague language ("our products are all-natural and eco-friendly") and claims that are difficult for consumers to easily prove or disprove ("we'll be carbon-neutral by 2020").

Decades after Westerveld called out hotels' bogus environmental claims, greenwashing practices have become more pervasive and increasingly [sophisticated](#), impacting the way [people think](#) about climate action and environmental protection.



**20,679\* Physicians**  
say **"LUCKIES**  
are *less irritating*"

**"It's toasted"**  
Your Throat Protection against irritation against cough



According to a recent Nationwide survey:  
**MORE DOCTORS SMOKE CAMELS**  
**THAN ANY OTHER CIGARETTE**

## FOSSIL FUEL GREENWASHING IS THE NEW CLIMATE DENIAL

Greenwashing [is the go-to tactic](#) in Big Oil's marketing playbook for dealing with the climate crisis, and it's a serious [barrier](#) to meaningful action to curb spiralling greenhouse gas emissions.

### Partners in Deception

Big Oil has long tried to dismiss comparisons with Big Tobacco – but the truth is, they have long been in the deception game together and Big Oil came up with the playbook later used by Big Tobacco to deceive the public. Like the tobacco industry, the fossil industry has known for decades about the harmful impact of its products for the Earth and our health. But to protect their profits, [tobacco](#) and [oil companies](#) spent billions over the past few decades to obscure the truth, [often using the same researchers and PR firms](#). Tobacco is [killing](#) over 8 million people a year around the world, while research [published](#) at the beginning of the decade estimated 8.7 million people die premature deaths annually due to fossil fuel air pollution. This isn't counting the lives lost due to the climate crisis, which is the [biggest threat to global health](#) of this century according to the Panamerican Health Organization.

◀ Images from [Stanford University](#). One tactic used by Big Tobacco to try to convince the public that smoking isn't harmful was to incorporate doctors in their advertisements.



A 2022 Greenpeace Netherlands [report](#) led by Harvard University researchers identified some form of [greenwashing](#) in 72% of social media posts by oil and gas companies. Using clever marketing techniques banking on [vague](#) language, vivid [imagery](#) and calculated [sponsorships](#), fossil fuel companies try to make you forget three major facts:

1. Fossil fuel companies' emissions are [driving](#) the climate crisis, and have done so for more than a century.
2. Despite being among the [first to know](#) (back in the 1980s) that burning oil, coal and gas would cause global warming, fossil fuel companies engaged in [decades-long public relations campaigns](#) denying the existence of climate change.
3. Now that they can't contest the reality of climate change, fossil fuel companies are switching up their well-thumbed playbook of denial to protect their profits through deceitful tactics that [impede and delay](#) serious climate action.

Fossil fuel greenwashing is particularly insidious because so much of it falls under what is called “issue or advocacy advertising” or “market-place advocacy”. This type of advertising—in contrast to ads that promote a product—aims to influence a legislative outcome or a policy debate. Big Oil in particular is known to ramp up ad spends when [media outlets and politicians](#) are focused on climate change.

## OTHER TOOLS IN BIG OIL'S DELAY-AND-DECEIVE ARSENAL

This report focuses on greenwashing, but that is just one strategy in a broader public relations playbook of delay and deception used by the fossil fuel industry. Other practices deployed by the industry include:

### Culture-Washing:

Sponsorship of [artistic, cultural and musical activities](#) helps associate fossil fuel companies with a progressive, educational agenda to sanitise their image.

### Sport-washing: [Sporting events and teams](#),

from the pros all the way down to little league are awash with fossil sponsorship. Ironically, they are even sponsoring [winter sports](#) that global heating threatens. This is another cheap way to buy their social licence.

[2014 Petro Canada image](#) highlighting their longtime sponsorship of Canadian olympians, and a [2021 promotional image](#) of archery athlete Andrew Azores. As noted in the fine print, Petro Canada is owned by Suncor Energy, a [member](#) of the Pathways Alliance. As detailed in this toolkit, Pathways Alliance is under investigation for greenwashing by Canada's Competition Bureau.



# HOW GREENWASHING HURTS YOU & THE PLANET

If a consumer bought a low-quality product due to false advertising, they would likely feel duped and probably wouldn't buy that product again. But customers often have no way to verify whether companies' green claims are true.

In 2022, [experts evaluating](#) climate claims made by four oil majors (ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron and BP) found that the companies are throwing around language like “low carbon” and “transition” without making the necessary investments in clean energy or truly transforming their dirty business models. These companies (plus ConocoPhillips) have [spent](#) over US\$3.6 billion on “reputation building” advertising over the 30 years prior to 2019. This is a key example of how the fossil fuel industry puts [more resources](#) into deceptive marketing than the transition to a clean-energy future.

**The key consequences of greenwashing are threefold:**

- 1. It enables industry to cover up the harms of their products.** Just like tobacco companies [lied](#) about the health risks of smoking, fossil fuel companies like [Exxon denied climate change](#) for decades. Now, people here in Canada and around the world are paying the price as they [lose their lives and homes](#) in [climate disasters](#) and to [fossil fuel pollution](#).
- 2. By normalising fossil fuels, greenwashing [delays](#) the much-needed shift to more sustainable energy options.** Industry knows that the public cares about the environment. By falsely positioning itself as part of the solution, it can lead consumers to erroneously believe that fossil fuels have a place in a climate-safe future.
- 3. It [delays](#) policy action.** Advocacy advertising aimed at influencing decision-makers can contribute to governments dragging their heels on climate action and help lock in subsidies that keep big polluters going. Together with the above tactic, this dictates what energy options are available, cheap, desirable and convenient for consumers.

## Canada's Competition Act

In Canada, the Competition Act is the law governing how companies conduct themselves in the marketplace, including false or misleading marketing practices. Watchdog organisations like Ad Standards (the advertising industry's nonprofit referee) and the Competition Bureau (an independent law enforcement agency) attempt to ensure fair play. Unfortunately, these agencies have not come up with an updated strategy to tackle greenwashing—and the fossil fuel industry takes advantage of this. That's why we need to learn to identify these deceptive practices, counter their disinformation and stop the lies.





## #1 - PALTERING: CHERRY-PICKING THE TRUTH

Paltering is a [scientifically researched](#) form of deception that boils down to “lying by telling the truth.”

When fossil fuel companies advertise clean initiatives that represent a tiny fraction of their overall operations, they don't disclose that such initiatives are just one ripe cherry in an otherwise rotten bowl. Unlike outright lies or omissions, paltering requires that a company or person use truthful statements to mislead. As Prof. Thomas Lyon [describes](#) it, paltering is when a company touts how they invested “\$5 million in renewable energy without telling you that they spent \$100 billion drilling for oil in a sensitive location and \$50 million lobbying against climate legislation.”

What's key here is that the greenwasher must have the intent to deceive. By cherry-picking facts to

advertise, companies disseminate information that is technically true but gives consumers a false impression of the entire business' sustainability.

One example of this is when companies only disclose one phase in production rather than the full life-cycle of emissions. Fossil fuel claims to go carbon neutral, refer only to their [operational emissions](#) (those produced during their day-to-day business activities) even if they don't say it outright. But remember, once fossil fuels leave company tanks, they are burned in car engines, boilers heating homes, airplanes, ships and more, [accounting for a vast majority](#) of full lifecycle emissions. Fossil fuels can never be carbon neutral.

Factory polluting industry with smoke and sky. Image from Shutterstock. ID: 2337078831





## WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

## “Renewable natural gas”: A red herring designed to distract

Fossil gas (called “natural gas” by industry) is a hydrocarbon composed primarily of methane, a potent greenhouse gas contributing to global warming. Gas companies are now touting “renewable natural gas” (RNG) made of biomethane derived from organic matter as a false solution and a distraction from the fact that a greenhouse gas still dominates their business.

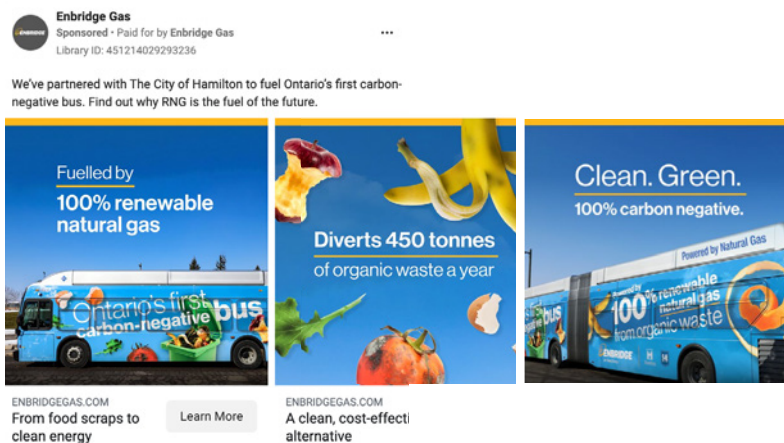
Ads by Canadian gas companies such as Enbridge, Énergir and Fortis feature cow dung and banana peels, giving consumers the impression that all or most of their gas is made of food waste. In reality, RNG made up [just 0.36%](#) of the natural gas distributed in Canada in 2021. Énergir even [missed its own paltry RNG target of just 1%](#) in 2022—a year when many of its ads touted RNG. Regardless, burning biomethane (such as on gas stoves) still [releases nitrogen dioxide and other toxins](#) that cause indoor air pollution and respiratory illnesses, especially in children.

Images 1 & 2: Enbridge Gas [advertisements on Meta](#) (owner of Facebook and Instagram), which ran from April 1-June 30, 2021. Enbridge has spent over \$650 000 on Meta ads since June 2019.

Image 3: Énergir advertisement in Montreal metro, May 2023.

Image 4: Fortis BC Instagram [post](#), October 2021.

All these images highlight use of organic matter in their production, despite organic matter produced gas being a very small portion of the gas distributed in Canada.



Carbon dioxide and methane  
are collected from waste

**fortisbc** 110w  
Renewable Natural Gas (RNG) is a carbon neutral energy source that works the same way as natural gas. With our partners, we capture greenhouse gas emitted from decomposing waste, purify it and deliver it through our existing natural gas system. RNG works with your regular natural gas appliances!

#RenewableNaturalGas #BioGas  
#RenewableEnergy #BCBuilder #BC  
#WestCoastBuilder #HomeBuilders

**No comments yet.**

Start the conversation.

140 views  
OCTOBER 7, 2021



## UNDER INVESTIGATION

### Environmental groups take TotalEnergies to court

In 2022, Greenpeace France and other environmental groups [took France-based TotalEnergies to court](#) for greenwashing (misleading commercial practices). Indeed the fossil fuel giant is using misleading advertising to convince consumers it can achieve net zero by 2050.

This is paltering because Total's global carbon emissions [outstrip](#) the entire country of [France](#), and the company is still [investing billions](#) into fossil fuels, putting them far away from the net zero 2050 pathway. The lawsuit also targets misleading ads on the climate virtues of fossil gas and biofuels.

TotalEnergies advertisement taken from [ClientEarth's](#) website.



**TOTAL**  
COMMITTED TO BETTER ENERGY



**BUSTED!****The UK bans Big Oil's ads overstating renewables investments**

In June 2023, the UK Advertising Standards Authority [banned ads by Shell, Repsol and Petronas](#) after a complaint was filed by campaigning group Adfree Cities. Shell's ads outrageously claimed: "From electric vehicle charging to renewable electricity for your home, Shell is giving customers more low-carbon choices and helping drive the UK's energy transition." British regulators ruled the ad misleading, noting that [95% of Shell's business](#) during the ad period depended on fossil fuels.

**BP withdraws shady ad campaign**

In 2019, UK environmental law organisation [ClientEarth](#) submitted a complaint against BP's "Possibilities Everywhere" and "Keep Advancing" campaigns. These campaigns promoted low-energy products despite 96%

of BP's annual expenditures going to oil and gas at the time. The complaint was filed under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. In response, [BP withdrew](#) its ads and promised to no longer engage in 'corporate reputation advertising' and redirect ad spending to advocate for progressive climate policies. This case proves that international bodies can help hold Big Oil accountable.

**It is deceptive to make a claim about the entire product, service, or company** based only on a certain aspect of that product, service, or company. Emphasising specific sustainable activities so as to give a mistaken impression about the environmental impact of the business is greenwashing. Further, all green claims must take into account the entire life cycle of a product.

**EnergyCorp**

# Advancing Possibilities

We're working to make energy cleaner

## Fossil fuels cause climate change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has found that emissions from fossil fuels are the dominant cause of global warming. The IPCC warns that fossil fuel emissions must be halved within 11 years if global warming is to be limited to 1.5°C. Warming above 1.5°C risks further sea level rise, extreme weather, biodiversity loss and species extinction, as well as food scarcity, worsening health and poverty for millions of people worldwide.

ClientEarth's spoof ad shows BP's "Possibilities Everywhere" billboard with a climate change warning label. ClientEarth has [called on governments to ban](#) fossil fuel ads—unless they feature a tobacco-style [warning label](#) disclosing spending on fossil fuels and identifying them as the main cause of global warming.





## #2 - THE CON ARTISTRY OF CARBON OFFSETS

The idea that the world can keep burning fossil fuels without any environmental harm is entirely [made up](#), but the fossil fuel industry is trying to persuade the public that it's true.

A [carbon offset](#) is a reduction in emissions that is used to compensate for emissions occurring elsewhere. Fossil fuel companies attempt to “offset” their emissions by purchasing carbon credits from planting trees or conserving forests with the goal of keeping emissions off their balance sheet. Using this dubious accounting they then try to market their product as carbon neutral. The reality is that these programs are failing—or worse, are outright scams.

An [investigation](#) by The Guardian and the watchdog organisation Corporate Accountability analysed the top 50 carbon offset programs internationally and found that 39 (78%) were “likely junk or worthless due to one or more fundamental failing that undermines

its promised emission cuts”. Evidence revealed that projects inflated claims of how much carbon would be stored and could not guarantee storage for hundreds of years, among a host of other issues. On top of this, offset projects can actually harm local communities and biodiversity. According to [the Global Forest Coalition](#), “[tree] plantations can lead to land grabbing, rights violations, soil erosion, freshwater depletion, biodiversity loss and many other impacts.”

What's more, offset programs put forests and nature at the disposal of the same corporations responsible for the climate and biodiversity crisis. Instead of commodifying nature for their benefit, we should be ensuring Indigenous Peoples and local communities are in the driver's seat. In short, offsets [threaten](#) real climate action and can have significant human rights and environmental concerns which make them unviable.

### WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

#### Shell's sleazy “Drive Carbon Neutral” ads.

Launched in 2020, Shell's “Drive Carbon Neutral” campaign led customers to believe that their fuel purchases could be offset by the company's forest-based carbon offsets. In 2021, Greenpeace Canada [filed a complaint](#) against Shell to the Competition Bureau for this misleading advertising. The complaint highlights the offsets' questionable claims and asserts that “driving carbon neutral” is impossible while continuing to burn fossil fuels. A very similar ad came under fire in the Netherlands, with Dutch regulators ordering Shell to pull the ads since the company could not prove their offsets worked as claimed.





**BUSTED!****European Union bans offset-based claims of carbon neutrality**

Given the revelations that carbon offsets are bunk, the [European Union \(EU\) has banned](#) claims of carbon neutrality when based on carbon offsets. The new law, which comes into effect in 2026, bans vague claims such as “carbon neutral” unless they can be substantiated. The law is an important breakthrough since it will make the EU the region with the [toughest stance](#) on greenwashing.



Brussels, Belgium. 27th January 2019. People take part in a march called 'Rise for Climate'.

**Suggested guidance:** It is deceptive to claim that buying carbon credits will offset emissions associated with a product, service, or company. We need to eliminate all greenhouse gas emissions, not allow reductions in one sector to be used as an excuse not to reduce somewhere else. There are far more emissions in the fossil fuel sector than natural carbon sinks (such as forests) or artificial ones (such as carbon capture and storage) can safely and permanently store.



## #3 - PETRO-SCIENCE FICTION AND ASPIRATIONAL CLAIMS

When industry leans on future-oriented statements to do the heavy lifting, we term these aspirational claims. When companies promote speculative, as-yet-unproven (often economically unviable) technologies, we've dubbed this petro-science fiction. This strategy is particularly damaging because the fossil fuel industry's issue advocacy campaigns are often used to secure [billions in subsidies](#) from governments for its [dead-end technologies](#). By bolstering their reputations as green innovators, companies attempt to convince consumers that we don't need to reduce fossil fuel use, since everything "will be solved in the future".

### UNDER INVESTIGATION



The Pathways Alliance, a coalition of six of the largest oil sands producers in Canada

### Carbon capture and storage: Easier said than done

In 2022, the Pathways Alliance (a coalition of six of the largest oil sands producers in Canada) launched a sweeping advertising campaign entitled "Let's Clear the Air." The campaign promoted their so-called "path to net zero" and ran during the 2022 FIFA World Cup and 2023 Super Bowl and wrap-around ads on buses across the country. The problem is that the coalition bets on "vastly unproven" carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies to deal with millions of barrels produced every day in the oil sands, a figure that reached 2.84 million barrels per day in 2021.



CCS involves a range of technologies that capture and transport carbon then store it by injecting it below geological formations to be permanently sequestered. Straightforward in theory, but many technologies are still in development. According to the US non-profit [Center for International Environmental Law](#), “[e]xisting CCS facilities capture less than 1 percent of global carbon emissions.”

The Climate Action Network (the world’s largest network of civil society organisations working together to promote government action to address the climate crisis whose membership includes Greenpeace International and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, CAPE) [adopted a position on carbon capture](#) that states:

- CCS at scale remains largely unproven and its potential to deliver significant emission reductions by mid-century is currently limited.
- Continued pursuit of CCS risks diverting attention and resources from proven, cost effective solutions. Outside of a few industrial processes, there are faster, cleaner, safer, more efficient, and cheaper means to reduce carbon dioxide emissions such as phasing out fossil fuels and replacing them with renewable energy, energy efficiency, and energy conservation.
- Direct Air Capture is in its infancy and is very costly and energy intensive, with serious doubts about its effectiveness.

In April 2023, the Competition Bureau [launched a formal investigation](#) into Pathways Alliance’s ads following a complaint about false and misleading advertising filed by Greenpeace Canada and CAPE. As noted in the [complaint](#), the current adoption of CCS technologies [isn’t happening at the pace or scale needed](#) to reduce emissions, and despite its net-zero claims, Pathways Alliance’s plan [does not account](#) for more than 80% of their emissions (scope 3 emissions), and still it does not add up to zero. Canada needs drastic emissions reductions now, but the Pathways Alliance’s reliance on CCS capacities that simply don’t exist is just a way to punt its members’ emissions problem to the future while expanding oil and gas production and getting those same members [billions](#) in government handouts.



Image 1: Pathways Alliance’s Let’s Clear the Air advertising on [Twitter](#), February 15, 2023

Images 2 & 3: The same Pathways Alliance campaign has been on the Toronto Transit Commission, as seen in this Pattison Outdoors advertising [video](#).

## WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

### Synth-fuels: A phony climate solution

Synth-fuels (or e-fuels) are made from captured carbon dioxide synthesised with renewably produced hydrogen. When they burn, they re-emit the carbon dioxide that was captured from the atmosphere, so [advocates argue](#) that this process is carbon neutral. But like other speculative technologies, the truth isn't so rosy. E-fuels remain incredibly [dirty and extremely expensive](#).

Fossil fuel producers like [Repsol](#) and ExxonMobil have an interest in keeping fossil fuels on life-support, as do carmakers like [Audi](#), [Porsche](#), and [Ferrari](#). They are trying to hold on to the internal combustion engine and postpone the transition to electric vehicles (EVs) by promoting synth-fuels.

The greenwashing of synth-fuels can be seen in a range of automotive advertising. A recent ad

from ExxonMobil, [billed as the first anti-EV ad in decades](#), depicts people at work and play bound by electric cables. It features the tagline “unplugging is a lot like breaking free” and urges consumers to escape their electric cables “for the love of driving.”

Here in Canada, a [recent edition](#) of the “Motor Mouth” column for Postmedia discussed “the growing case for synthetic fuel”, calling synthetic fuel “as green as an EV”. That’s simply not true. According to [Transport & Environment](#), the inefficiency of synth-fuels means that only 16% of the energy generated is used to propel the vehicle, compared with 77% in a battery electric vehicle. Plus, synth-fuels poison the air with toxic gases such as methane and nitrous oxide [harmful to human health](#).

### Motor Mouth: The growing case for synthetic fuel

*What will power your zero-emissions vehicle of the future?*

David Booth

Published Apr 07, 2023 • Last updated Apr 10, 2023 • 7 minute read

 45 Comments

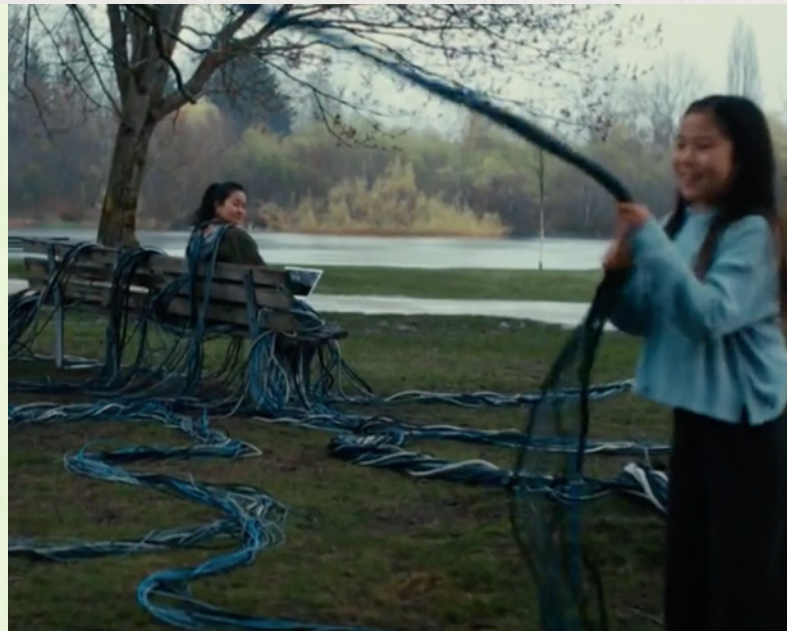


Image 1: Motor Mouth [article](#) promoting synthetic fuel, April 7, 2023.

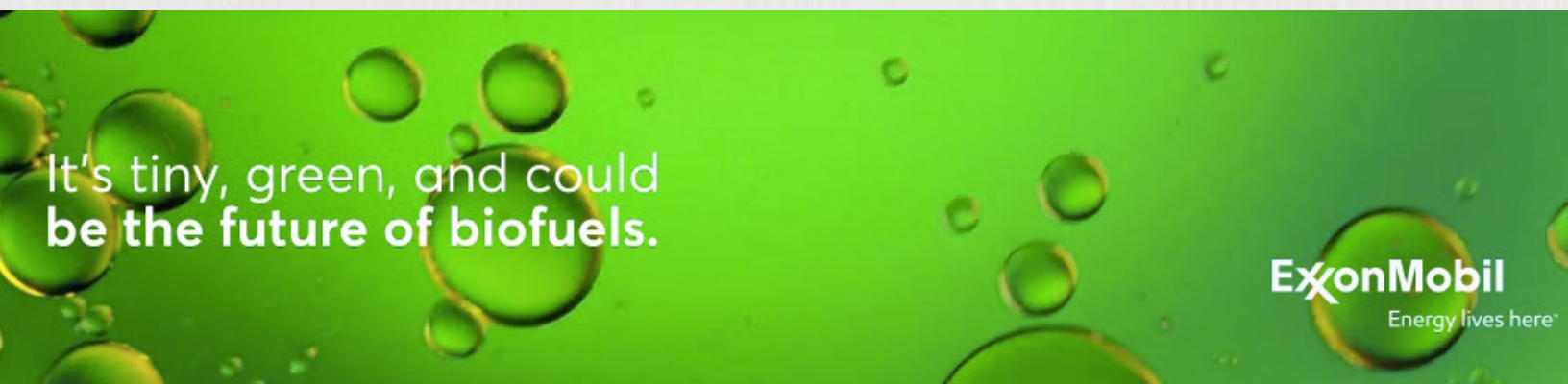
Image 2: Screenshot from an [advertisement](#) by Mobil Oil, a subsidiary of ExxonMobil, July 13, 2023.



**BUSTED!****Algae petro-fiction: ExxonMobil's "scum scam"**

In 2011, the [UK banned](#) ExxonMobil ads promoting experimental biofuels made from algae for overstating the technology's environmental impact. Exxon claimed the technology lowered emissions, even though CEO Rex Tillerson [acknowledged](#) it was likely more than 25 years away from producing usable fuels. A decade later, Exxon's algae research was shelved in 2023 due to a lack of economic viability. Despite heavily promoting algae research

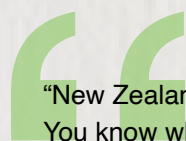
in green marketing for years, Exxon's annual spending on climate-related branding in 2018 was [almost double its annual investment](#) in biofuel research of 2020. In reality, the research was more about enhancing Exxon's environmental reputation than protecting the climate, which is why environmentalist [Bill McKibben quipped](#) that it was a total "scum scam."



▲  
ExxonMobil ad that ran in the Financial Times and The New York Times in October 2018.  
You can watch Exxon's full advertisement on algae biofuel on [YouTube](#).

**Green groups deflate Firstgas' aspirational climate claims**

In July 2021, [lawyers for Climate Action NZ](#) won a case against Firstgas, the largest gas network in the country, for misleading advertising. The company claimed to be going "zero carbon" yet advocated for business-as-usual gas consumption. Take a look at what they told consumers:



"New Zealand's heading towards zero carbon so we're ensuring our gas is going zero carbon too. You know what that means for you? Absolutely nothing. You can continue doing what you love. And help change the world, without changing too much of yours."

As it turned out, all Firstgas had done was [preliminary research](#) into alternative forms of gas, so regulators deemed the ads "unsubstantiated, incorrect, and misleading."

**Unless a claim related to future environmental performance includes verifiable commitments and independent monitoring it is deceptive.** For “net-zero by 2050” this would mean a fully-costed plan that covers all lifecycle emissions, is based on existing and viable technology, and is accompanied by accountability mechanisms (ex., interim targets and annual reporting). The United Nations high level expert group on net zero claims has released [10 recommendations](#) for accountable net zero pledges.



**Fuelling Canada**

Sponsored • Paid for by Canadian Gas Association

Library ID: 289003893491007

Natural gas drives the economy by giving our businesses access to affordable energy to operate.



FUELLINGCANADA.CA

**Fuelling business in Canada**

Find out why natural gas and its infrastructure are the foundation of Canada's energy future.

[Learn more](#)

## GREENWASHING AND AFFORDABILITY

In the midst of a cost of living crisis, fossil fuel companies are misrepresenting their products as cheap and affordable leaving consumers to pick up the tab. Complaints lodged against the [Canadian Gas Association](#) and [Enbridge](#) with the Competition Bureau charge that they are falsely claiming that gas heating is the cheapest option, when heat pumps are far more affordable due to their 300-400% efficiency, potentially saving customers thousands of dollars over the lifetime of the product.

Greenwashed ads hide the exorbitant costs of “cleaning” up dirty fuels. Renewable natural gas costs from [double to ten times the cost](#) of fracked gas (the latter is still a fossil fuel that needs to be phased out), while carbon capture and storage remains [prohibitively expensive](#) compared to renewables, which are still the [cheapest](#) option. Investors beware! Those greenwashed ads are also targeted at you, and in Canada minimise what the journal *Nature* calculates could be more than [\\$120 billion in stranded assets as soon as 2036](#) as a result of changes in the global energy mix and the acceleration of climate policy ambition. Finally greenwashing penalises genuinely green businesses, pushing them out of the marketplace and raising prices for everyone.



Canadian Gas Association advertising campaign, Fuelling Canada, claiming that the product is affordable and cost-effective. Meta ad running from July-Oct 2023, Ad Library ID: 289003893491007.





## #4 - VAGUE “GREEN” BUZZWORDS

This bread-and-butter greenwashing strategy is alive and well in the fossil fuel sector. Vague and generic terms like *green*, *clean*, *efficient*, *sustainable*, *eco-friendly*, and *natural* are routinely used to describe fossil fuel products, operations, and companies.

The Competition Bureau of Canada [urges businesses](#) to “avoid vague claims such as ‘eco-friendly’ or ‘safe for the environment’, which can lead to multiple interpretations, misunderstanding and deception.” But without teeth, such guidelines aren’t always followed. Instead, such ill-defined words are used intentionally because they can leave consumers with a positive impression without requiring companies to adhere to strict, enforceable standards. Take a look at some of the examples below.

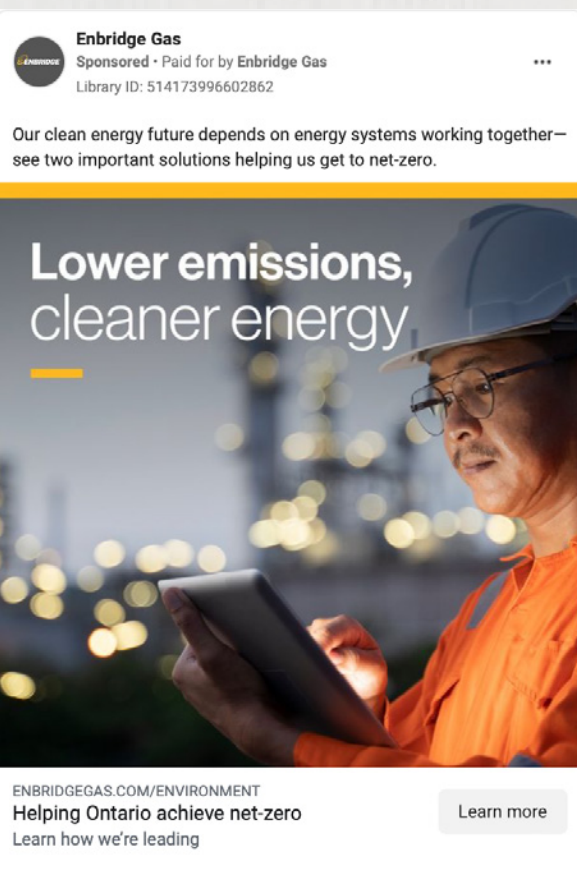


Image 1: Social media [advertisement](#) by Enbridge Gas which ran in June 2021.

Image 2: Frontier Airline [advertisement](#) promoting the company as the “greenest” airline.

Image 3: ExxonMobil [ad](#) used as part of their announcement of expansions of LNG in India.

## UNDER INVESTIGATION

### Making the Canadian Gas Association come clean

In November 2022, the Competition Bureau officially [launched an investigation](#) into the Canadian Gas Association’s “[Fuelling Canada](#)” advertising campaign, which presents fossil gas as “clean” and “affordable” — which might wrongfully portray them as safe.

In the [complaint](#), doctors and health experts at the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, underscored the truth: that the climate warming potential of the methane in fossil gas is [80 times](#) more potent than carbon dioxide. Plus, fossil gas [pollutes](#) the water and air at every stage of its [life-cycle](#), from extraction to processing to combustion and gas stoves cause indoor air pollution posing a serious health risk for children’s respiratory health. This means gas can never be truthfully described as “clean” meaning free from pollution. To learn more about the Canadian Gas Association’s false affordability claims, see page 17 of this toolkit.



Image 1: Fuelling Canada, a campaign by the Canadian Gas Association, claiming that natural gas is “cleaner,” March 22, 2022.

Image 2: Fuelling Canada advertisement on Meta, July-August 2023 (Meta Library ID: 1074130163556248).



## SUGGESTED GUIDELINES:

Companies should not be able to make generic claims without demonstrating the factual environmental record.



Child wearing a mask to prevent air pollution. Photograph by Somchai Sanvongchaiya from Vecteezy.com

## BUSTED!

### Watchdog shuts down Big Oil’s dubious “cleanest” fuel claim

In 2017, the Dutch advertising watchdog censured [Shell and ExxonMobil](#) for claiming that natural gas was “the cleanest of all fossil fuels.” The agency took issue with the companies’ false implication that fossil fuels can be produced without environmental damage. To pre-empt the ruling, online versions of the ads were changed to redefine gas as “the least polluting fossil fuel”—an unacceptably low bar from companies who are stooping lower and lower to delay climate action.

### Norway pumps the brakes on car companies green messages

In [Norway](#), rules in place since 2007 state that no car can be “green,” “clean” or “environmentally friendly.” The country’s advertising guidelines are some of the world’s strictest national regulations. According to the national regulator: “If someone says their car is more ‘green’ or ‘environmentally friendly’ than others then they would have to be able to document it in every aspect from production, to emissions, to energy use, to recycling.”



## #5 - DOUBLE DIPPING

This greenwashing technique amounts to a car company trumpeting how safe its vehicles are because they have seat belts, which are required by law. Companies should not get accolades for doing the bare minimum. Nor should they be allowed to promote something as their own initiative when it is actually required by law. This may give consumers the wrongful impression that companies are taking climate leadership seriously, which may influence consumers' purchasing decisions and perception of the company.

### SUGGESTED GUIDELINES:

It is deceptive to **present what is required by law as a distinctive feature of a business' offerings or actions**. Stopping this practice will encourage companies to innovate and go beyond the requirements of the law, distinguish themselves by this extra effort and be rewarded by consumers as appropriate.

### WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

#### Chevron does, but Chevron shouldn't, mislead the public

In the 1980s, [Chevron's "People Do" advertising campaign](#) went public with a series of tactics that would come to win over socially conscious audiences likely to be ["hostile" to the company](#). As part of the campaign, the company promoted a number of environmental projects that it was legally required to undertake, such as [protecting grizzlies](#) in Montana and kit foxes in California. Critics argued that the ads supported deregulation since they implied that companies had everything under control—when in practice, their actions were a direct result of the law.

Chevron [spent more on the ads](#) than the projects themselves and it paid off. Two years after the campaign ran, Chevron's own [polls showed that](#) they had become the oil company most trusted by people in California to protect the environment. This translated to [increased sales](#): "among those who saw the commercials, Chevron sales increased by 10%, while among the [ads] target audience of the socially concerned types, sales jumped by 22%." Meanwhile, the company racked up numerous environmental protection [violations](#) causing [massive damage](#) in the decades surrounding these ads. Unsurprisingly, "People Do" is [considered](#) to be the greenwashing gold standard.



◀ Image 1: Screenshot from Chevron's 1997 "People Do" campaign video.  
Image 2: [Poster](#) from Chevron's "People Do" campaign promoting wildlife protection programs.





## #6 - NATURE RINSING

By placing their products in natural environments (such as forests, beaches or animal habitats), polluters try to appear environmentally conscious by association. These depictions capitalise on peoples' shared values—such as spending time with loved ones outdoors. They aim to instil a sense of wonder and an emotional connection with the company. *Nature rinsing* serves to wash away the ties that bind fossil fuels to environmental destruction in consumers' imagination.

### WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

#### Kia tries to sell oversized vehicles with overdone *nature rinsing*

The 2022 Kia “Beachcomber” [commercial](#) for the Kia Sportage X-Pro SUV (sports utility vehicle) features a person driving the SUV on a beach and using it to rake up trash so that sea turtles can crawl out of the sea and reach pristine nesting sites in the sand.



Fossil fuel interests are strategically appropriating the beauty of nature to strengthen their green messaging”

– Jeffrey Supran,  
Harvard University  
[Researcher](#)

[“Make more good”](#), the commercial urges viewers. Nevermind the fact that oversized gas guzzlers like SUVs contribute to global warming, which is actually endangering sea turtle populations. How? Sea turtle eggs mature into males at cooler temperatures and females at warmer temperatures; with planetary temperatures soaring, sea turtles are increasingly being born female—in some locations, [99% of babies are female](#).



Extract from KIA Sportage Beachcomber X-Pro 2023 ad – watch the [full version](#) on YouTube

It is deceptive to claim anything environmentally positive about fossil fuel products (coal, oil, and gas) or fossil fuel transport (ex., internal combustion vehicles, boats, and planes) without misleading people. As such, there should be a prohibition against using images of nature, green language and generic green language **about fossil fuel products, their transport and the businesses that produce or transport them.**

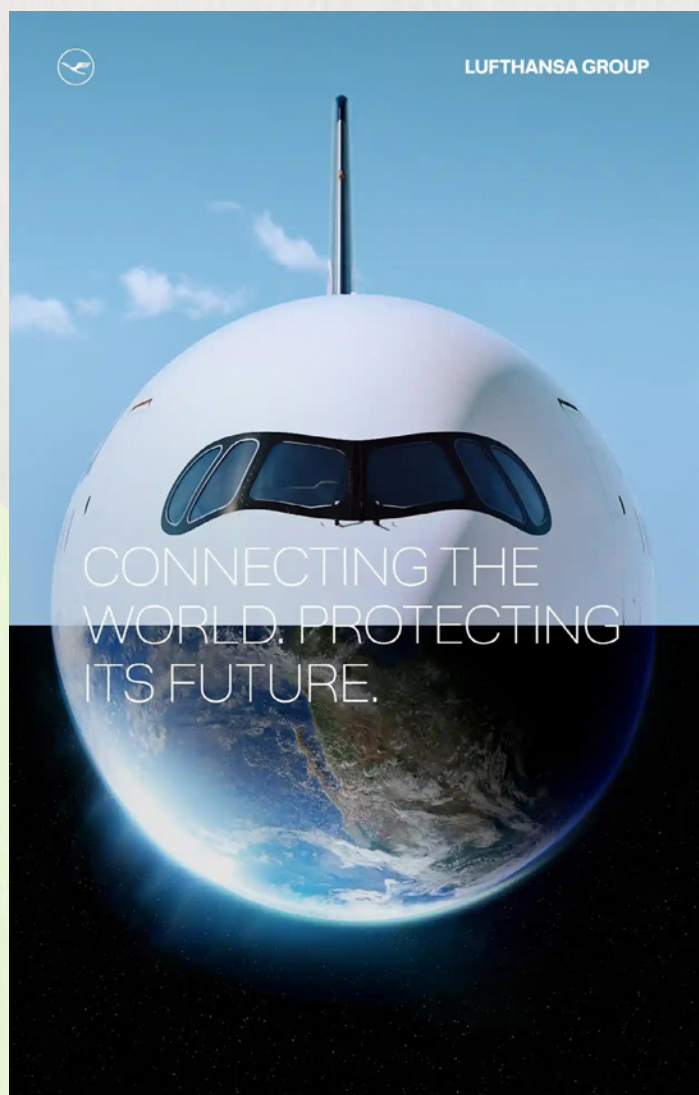
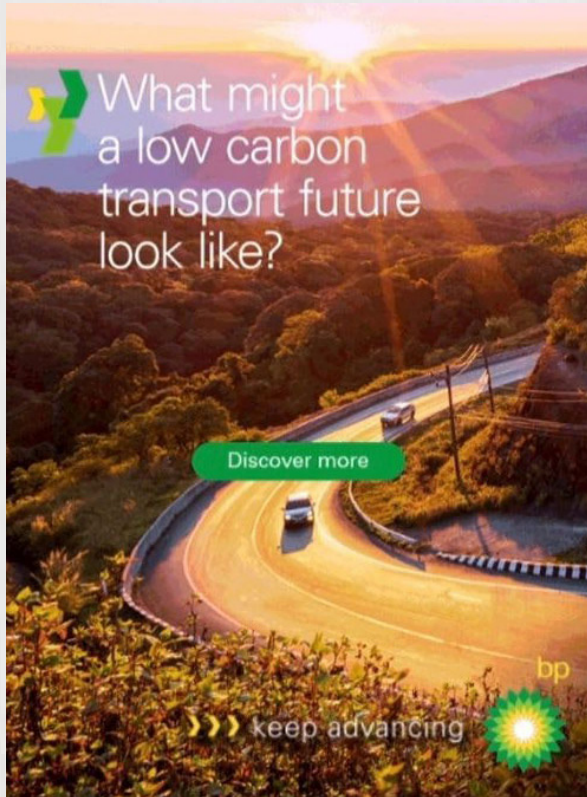


Image 1: BP advertisement found [here](#).

Image 2: Fuelling Canada's [post](#) on Instagram from November 24, 2021. Fuelling Canada is a large-scale advertising campaign from the Canadian Gas Association, and is currently under [investigation](#) by the Competition Bureau of Canada for misleading advertising.

Image 3: Renault vehicle advertisement found [here](#). Groupe Renault is the [fourth](#) largest car manufacturer in the world.

Image 4: Enbridge Gas Instagram [post](#) from November 10, 2022.

Image 5: Lufthansa advertisement [banned in the UK in 2023](#) for misleading consumers





## #7 - PLAIN OLD LIES

Greenwashing occasionally skips the nuance of just letting the public get the wrong idea. Sometimes it's just straight up lying because most oil companies aren't as honest as [Humble Oil](#) (now [ExxonMobil](#)) was in the 1962 Life Magazine ad below.



Advertising is  
legalised lying”

– H.G. Wells

**EACH DAY HUMBLE SUPPLIES ENOUGH ENERGY TO MELT 7 MILLION TONS OF GLACIER!**

THIS GIANT GLACIER, ALASKA, IS A RIVER OF ICE STRETCHING 270 SQUARE MILES. YET THE PETROLEUM ENERGY HUMBLE SUPPLIES AMERICA COULD MELT IT AT THE RATE OF 7 MILLION TONS A DAY.

This giant glacier has remained unmelted for centuries. Yet, the petroleum energy Humble supplies—if converted into heat—could melt it at the rate of 80 tons each second! To meet the nation's growing needs for energy, Humble has applied science to nature's resources to become America's Leading Energy Company. Working wonders with oil through research, Humble provides energy in many forms—to help heat our homes, power our transportation, and to furnish industry with a great variety of versatile chemicals. Stop at a Humble station for famous Esso Extra gasoline, and see why the “Happy Motoring” Sign is the World's First Choice!

**HUMBLE**  
OIL & REFINING COMPANY  
America's Leading Energy Company

▲  
Humble Oil ad in Life Magazine, 1962.

### WHERE YOU'VE SEEN IT

#### “Talking green while lobbying brown”

It's impossible to talk seriously about fossil fuel greenwashing without talking about the time and money industry spends lobbying politicians to protect their interests.

The [combined profits](#) of Canada's biggest oil patch companies totalled CAD\$38.3 billion in 2022, and these companies are using their power to keep the money rolling in. Research by the international non-profit InfluenceMap shows that [Canada's oil industry](#)

[is lobbying](#) against vital climate policies such as a proposed cap on oil and gas emissions. In 2022, Natural Resources Canada had [318 reported meetings](#) with oil and gas lobbyists, while Finance Canada had 104.

When companies talk about supporting environmentally safe business but lobby against climate action and environmental protection, [researchers call this form of greenwashing](#) “talking green while lobbying brown.”

The New York Times

PAID POST ⓘ

# The Future of Energy? It May Come From Where You Least Expect

How scientists are tapping algae and plant waste to fuel a sustainable energy future.



▲ Paid ExxonMobil ad in The New York Times

## UNDER INVESTIGATION

### Exxon has known about fossil fuelled-climate change since the 1970s

Recent [investigations have revealed](#) that in the 1970s and 1980s, Exxon conducted groundbreaking research into the impacts of fossil fuels on the climate. With incredible accuracy, the company projected the amount of warming that burning fossil fuels would induce. Yet, instead of raising the alarms and making necessary changes to avoid catastrophe, Exxon tried to make the science seem too uncertain to establish a link between fossil fuels and global warming.

When climate change became widely accepted, Exxon changed its tune, claiming that its business was coming up with climate solutions. But the company's outright lies have already had a devastating impact on human health, the environment, and the safety of

communities around the world.

This deception has prompted a wave of lawsuits to be brought by US states and municipalities against Exxon and other fossil fuel industry players as well as a [House Investigation](#) into Big Oil's deception. Most recently the [state of California filed a lawsuit](#), arguing that the company's deceit delayed climate action and left it to deal with extreme weather disasters. In Canada, while [35 climate lawsuits](#) are pending against governments, experts say corporations will be next. Already, action to hold Big Oil accountable has been put on city council discussion tables in [Vancouver](#) and [Toronto](#).



**BUSTED!****Volkswagen caught cheating on emissions testing**

Volkswagen, the world's biggest carmaker, decided that rather than reduce its diesel cars' emissions, it would instead intentionally [deploy deceptive software](#) that could cheat regulatory emissions testing on 11 million cars worldwide. As a result, its cars emitted toxic gases at levels up to [40 times the permitted levels](#) of nitrogen oxides, while the company touted them as ecofriendly "clean diesel" options. Diesel exhaust fumes and nitrogen oxides have been [definitively linked](#) to lung cancer responsible for thousands of preventable deaths each year.

Volkswagen's cheating was discovered by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 2015, who ruled that Volkswagen had violated the Clean Air Act. The company has paid out over [€32 billion](#) to date in the United States alone and is still on the hook for billions more worldwide.

[The Competition Bureau of Canada](#) also settled with the carmaker in what remains the [largest environmental fine in Canada](#), including a pay-out

to affected customers. Yet, the company was never held criminally responsible for its lies or accountable for the health and environmental impacts suffered by the public as a result. The company was back to [making profits](#) the following year.

**SUGGESTED  
REMEDY:**

Given the scale of companies' deception and their apparent refusal to reform combined with the urgent need to transition off fossil fuels to clean energy, Canadian regulators at all levels should enact a comprehensive ban on fossil fuel advertising. As was the case with Big Tobacco, this is the only way to tackle ubiquity of greenwashing ads and the straight up deception deployed by industry.

[Screengrab](#) of a Volkswagen advertisement promoting a vehicle with the TDI Clean Diesel engine.



# WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING TO STOP GREENWASHING?

Canada is behind the curve on shutting down shady advertising by fossil fuel companies. Decision-makers at all levels of government need to make serious legislative changes in order to address the full scope of fossil fuel greenwashing targeting the Canadian public – each of these deceptive practices can and should be identified and banned.

Acknowledging the negative impact of fossil fuels, some jurisdictions are taking the step of banning their ads altogether. This sends a clear message that such a destructive industry should not be able to promote its business. Regulators in Canada should follow the examples set by other jurisdictions around the world and implement bold laws that protect consumers and our planet. Those clamping down on greenwashing and false fossil fuel ads include:



## FRANCE

In 2022, France became the first country to [ban ads for fossil fuel products](#), including coal, oil and natural gas. Car ads [must also carry a disclaimer](#) encouraging sustainable transportation, such as cycling and public transport with the hashtag #SeDéplacerMoinsPolluer and one of three messages: “For short journeys, walk or cycle”; “Think about carpooling”; “Take public transport daily.”



## NETHERLANDS

In 2020, [Amsterdam](#) (Netherlands) became the first city in the world to ban fossil fuel and air travel advertising from the city. [Seven other Dutch cities](#) have passed motions banning fossil fuel ads, along with [15 Australian](#) councils, the [city of Liverpool and others in the UK](#). [Stockholm](#) has also committed to ban fossil ads and sponsorships.



## EUROPEAN UNION

In 2023, the European Union (EU) outlined a new [Green Claims Directive](#) which aims to prevent greenwashing and empower consumers for the green transition. It explicitly prohibits most of the deceptive practices outlined in this guide.



## UNITED KINGDOM


In the UK, the Competition and Markets Authority has appointed a sustainability task-force and published an updated [Green Claims Code](#) to [help businesses comply](#) when making environmental claims.

Find a comprehensive list of successes and campaigns for fossil fuel ad bans in the [World Without Fossil Fuel Ads database](#).




## REGULATING ADVERTISING CAN SAVE LIVES

Advertising restrictions on products scientifically proven to be causing a public health crisis can lead to significant behaviour change. Before Big Tobacco's advertisements were banned in Canada in the 1960s, [more than 50% of Canadian adults smoked](#). As of 2020, that number is just [10.3%](#).




**KILLER HEAT WAVES:  
BROUGHT TO YOU  
BY OIL AND GAS**




CAPE  
Canadian Association  
of Physicians  
for the Environment  
Association canadienne  
des médecins  
pour l'environnement  
ACME

Burning fossil fuels is causing a health emergency. Doctors are calling on government to protect our health.

Join the movement at [cape.ca/ourhealth](https://cape.ca/ourhealth)



**RISING CHILDHOOD  
ASTHMA RATES:  
BROUGHT TO YOU  
BY OIL AND GAS**



CAPE  
Canadian Association  
of Physicians  
for the Environment  
Association canadienne  
des médecins  
pour l'environnement  
ACME

Burning fossil fuels is causing a health emergency. Doctors are calling on government to protect our health.

Join the movement at [cape.ca/ourhealth](https://cape.ca/ourhealth)



**CHOKING ON  
WILDFIRE SMOKE:  
BROUGHT TO YOU  
BY OIL AND GAS**



CAPE  
Canadian Association  
of Physicians  
for the Environment  
Association canadienne  
des médecins  
pour l'environnement  
ACME

Burning fossil fuels is causing a health emergency. Doctors are calling on government to protect our health.

Join the movement at [cape.ca/ourhealth](https://cape.ca/ourhealth)

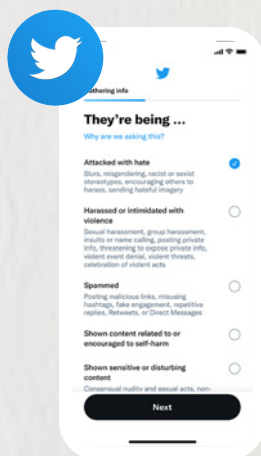


Honest Fossil Fuel Advertisements  
CAPE-created billboards in Ottawa, November 2023. The health harms of climate change, which has been caused by the burning of fossil fuels, is highlighted in these advertisements.

Emailing companies to report an ad or reporting greenwashing on social media are all great steps that you can take to denounce the misleading practice. But we encourage you to take this further! Check out Part 2 of this toolkit to formally report advertising campaigns in Canada. We made an easy step-by-step guide on how you can tackle greenwashing on a bigger scale. By filing official complaints, you can help take greenwashing ads down!

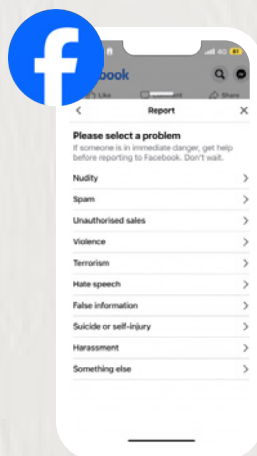
## TAKE ACTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Have you seen an advertisement that you think is greenwashing? **Report it!**  
Find some quick tips below or take action using our toolkit.



### Report an ad on Twitter

1. Select “Unacceptable Business Practices”
2. Provide company’s Twitter handle, found under their name on their profile page (include the @ symbol)
3. Provide at least one URL to show the ads



### Reporting an ad on Facebook or Instagram

1. On post, click the “...” in the top right corner
2. Select “report”
3. When asked why you are reporting, you will most likely select “false information”
4. Select “Social Issue”

You can also report an ad after it has run using the [Meta Ad Library](#).

### Don't forget to tag companies on social media!

If you've seen an ad and taken a screenshot, you can also post about it on social media. Tagging the company, and other people or organizations with large followings can get their attention.

Get our [Take Action Against Fossil Fuel Greenwashing toolkit](#) and our [Greenwashing Resources](#).



**GREENPEACE**

[greenpeace.ca](http://greenpeace.ca)

 @greenpeaceCA

 [greenpeace.canada](https://www.facebook.com/greenpeace.canada)

 [greenpeace\\_canada](https://www.instagram.com/greenpeace_canada)

ACME  
Association canadienne  
des médecins  
pour l'environnement



CAPE  
Canadian Association  
of Physicians  
for the Environment

[cape.ca](http://cape.ca)

 @CAPE\_ACME

 [Canadian Association of Physicians  
for the Environment \(CAPE\)](https://www.facebook.com/cape.doctors)

 [cape\\_doctors](https://www.instagram.com/cape_doctors)