
District of Columbia Sues BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell for Misleading Public on Climate Change

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Washington, D.C., Attorney General Karl A. Racine sued four of the world's largest oil and gas companies on Thursday for misleading consumers about the impact their products have on the climate.

Coming just a day after Minnesota filed a similar suit, the District lawsuit contends that BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell have been aware since the 1950s of the threat posed by fossil fuels but launched public relations campaigns to manufacture doubt about the reality and seriousness of climate change. It seeks a court order for the companies to pay civil penalties, provide financial relief for District residents, and stop their disingenuous PR campaigns.

“For decades, these oil and gas companies spent millions to mislead consumers and discredit climate science in pursuit of profits,” Racine said in a statement. “The defendants violated the District’s consumer protection law by concealing the fact that using fossil fuels threatens the health of District residents and the environment. [The Office of the Attorney General] filed this suit to end these disinformation campaigns and to hold these companies accountable for their deceptive practices.”

The lawsuit also maintains that the companies’ current marketing campaigns hype the relative “green” benefits of natural gas and other products, suggesting that they are “clean” and “emissions-reducing,” while concealing the fact that they still contribute significantly to the climate crisis.

“Defendants have shifted their advertising strategies to mislead DC consumers into believing that buying Defendants’ products supports companies committed to reducing and reversing the effects of climate change,” the lawsuit asserts. “In fact, the opposite is true.”

The four companies named in the District lawsuit are major contributors to global warming. Along with ConocoPhillips, they are responsible for 12.5 percent of all industrial carbon pollution emitted between 1854 and 2010, according to a 2013 study by the Climate Accountability Institute.

Both of the lawsuits filed this week in Washington, D.C., and Minnesota are similar to fraud cases brought by Massachusetts and New York attorneys general against ExxonMobil.

Massachusetts' lawsuit, filed in October, claims that ExxonMobil deceived consumers about the threat its products pose to the climate. It has not yet gone to trial.

New York state prosecutors argued that the oil company defrauded investors by downplaying the financial risks it faces from possible climate regulation. In December, the New York Supreme Court ruled in favor of ExxonMobil on the narrow charge before it, but the presiding judge made it clear that “[n]othing in this opinion is intended to absolve Exxon from responsibility for contributing to climate change,” because “this is a securities fraud case, not a climate change case.”

The District and Minnesota lawsuits also follow other legal actions across the country to hold fossil fuel companies accountable for climate change-related property damage. At least 10 counties and cities, including Baltimore, Boulder, Honolulu, New York City and San Francisco, are seeking compensation for damages caused by rising sea levels, wildfires and extreme weather events linked to climate change. Thus far, Rhode Island is the only state that has filed a “cost recovery” lawsuit.
