

Targeting the climate culprits



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By Phil Mattera, [Dirt Diggers Digest](#)

The new [U.S. National Climate Assessment](#) makes for sobering reading. In a document of more than 800 pages, it shows that climate change is not some possibility in the distant future but rather a crisis we are already beginning to experience. Extreme weather events linked to climate change, it states, are "disrupting people's lives and damaging some sectors of our economy."

Although it is forthright in stating the scientific evidence, the report, as an official government document, avoids assigning blame for the run-up in greenhouse gas emissions to specific parties, and it does not make specific proposals for mitigating the problem.

A very different approach is taken in research recently published by the Climate Accountability Institute, which as its name suggests is very much about naming names. The institute's [Carbon Majors](#) project has accomplished the remarkable feat of estimating how much in the way of carbon and methane emissions can be linked to specific companies going back decades.

In a painstaking analysis, principal investigator Richard Heede has reconstructed the corporate lineage of the major fossil fuel and cement corporations, assembled data on their historical output and estimated the greenhouse gas emissions caused by that output. In the case of Chevron, for example, the analysis goes back to 1912 and includes predecessor entities such as Standard Oil of California, Gulf Oil, Texaco, Getty and Unocal. The report also covers state-owned oil companies, which Heede notes have not done a good job of providing production statistics.

In all, Heede documents more than 900 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents and links them to 90 of the world's largest oil, gas, coal and cement-producing entities. If contributing to the climate crisis can be considered an offense against the planet, these 90 entities are the biggest climate culprits.

So who are they? Table 11 of Heede's [report](#) shows that the companies with the largest cumulative emissions are the following:

1. Chevron: 51.1 billion metric tons
2. Exxon Mobil: 46.7 billion metric tons
3. Saudi Aramco: 46 billion metric tons
4. BP: 35.8 billion metric tons
5. Gazprom: 32.1 billion metric tons
6. Royal Dutch Shell: 30.8 billion metric tons
7. National Iranian Oil Company: 29.1 billion metric tons
8. Pemex: 20 billion metric tons
9. ConocoPhillips: 16.9 billion metric tons
10. Petroleos de Venezuela: 16.2 billion metric tons

Pressuring these companies through a divestment campaign of the type that is beginning to take hold among U.S. universities (Stanford has just [announced](#) it will purge its portfolio of coal stocks) is a good start, but it will probably not be enough.

Other approaches are also being pursued. In an [article](#) in *The Nation*, Dan Zegart reports on efforts by environmental lawyers to mount a legal assault on fossil fuel companies like that used against Big Tobacco. It turns out that these lawyers are studying Heede's research closely and are trying to figure out ways to use it in their suits.

Putting the industry on the defensive in the courts as well as in the streets is important, because the Carbon Majors will increasingly depict themselves as leaders of the effort to overcome the climate crisis rather than their true identity as key culprits in causing it to happen. I'm sure that Chevron is preparing a new version of its "Will You Join Us?" ad campaign of a few years ago, in which it painted a false picture of itself as part of the clean-energy vanguard.

The recent agreement by Exxon Mobil to insert warnings in its financial reports about the risks to its fossil fuel assets from possible stricter limits on carbon emissions is being hailed by environmentalists as a major transparency advance, but it could also be used by the company as a way of limiting future legal liability.

Another troubling sign of potential corporate maneuvering can be found in the National Climate Assessment itself. It is



surprising to open Chapter 4 on Energy Supply and Use and find that one of the lead authors is Jan Dell of ConocoPhillips, one of Heede's top-ten Carbon Majors. I, for one, would prefer not to see oil company representatives playing a role preparing key analyses of the climate crisis. The fossil fuel industry is a big part of that problem (to the tune of 900 million metric tons), not part of the solution.