

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051  
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<http://oversight.house.gov>

### Opening Statement Chairman Jamie Raskin (MD-08)

#### Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

#### Hearing on “Examining the Oil Industry’s Efforts to Suppress the Scientific Truth About Climate Change”

October 23, 2019

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Good morning. Thank you all for joining us today for our hearing on climate change. Before we begin, I want to take a moment to recognize our beloved colleague and friend, Chairman Elijah Cummings. Elijah believed with all his heart and mind that government must be an instrument for the common good of all, not the special interest agendas of the few. His passion for freedom, justice, and strong democracy will infuse the work of this Subcommittee and this Committee for generations to come.

As our nation mourns him, many people have been sharing some of Elijah’s most inspirational aphorisms, one of which is apt today. In a 2016 hearing about the environmental and public health crisis unfolding in Flint, Michigan, Elijah called on his colleagues to recognize the moral gravity of the situation. He said “our children are the living messages we send to a future we will never see. The question is . . . will we rob them of their destiny? Will we rob them of their dreams? No, we will not do that.”

Elijah’s words echo for us in the investigation of climate change, the civilizational emergency of our times, which threatens all of the rights and freedoms of the people, including the right to live. Climate change is one of the preeminent civil rights issues of our time. **The evidence seems overwhelming that, for decades, the oil industry understood the lethal threat of climate change but misled the American people and buried the scientific truth of climate change.** The industry has deprived the voting public of crucial information with predictable, lopsided results: working people without the time or money to fight back against Big Oil are paying the heaviest price for climate change.

**Oil companies like Exxon knew the scientific reality of climate change forty years ago but waged a war of deception that cost us precious time in the fight to save our planet.**

In 1977, Exxon scientist James Black told the company's top executives that fossil fuel usage was releasing enough carbon dioxide to change the planet's climate.

Two years later, in 1979, an internal Exxon memo noted that the buildup of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere would "bring about dramatic changes in the world's environment."

In a 1981 memo, Exxon executive Roger Cohen cautioned against understating the threat to our planet, warning that the Earth's temperature could rise so high that it would "produce effects which will indeed be catastrophic (at least for a substantial fraction of the population)."

Exxon knew decades ago that climate change was real and would have devastating consequences.

In fact, according to Exxon scientist Ed Garvey, who is here today, Exxon was so certain of its science that it originally sought to be part of the solution and launched a sophisticated research program aimed at further understanding the full range of carbon dioxide's effects on our planet. To Exxon's credit, its scientists were at the forefront of this research and their dire predictions turned out to be frighteningly accurate.

When faced with the reality of the massive damage fossil fuels were likely to cause, Exxon could have chosen to present this truth to the American public, redirect its own research and development resources, and lead the way to a global shift towards alternative energy sources. But this was not the path Exxon chose. Instead, it sold off its renewable energy companies, doubled-down on fossil fuels, and, along with other Big Oil companies like Shell and Mobil, launched an extensive and sinister campaign of climate denial, undermining its own scientists.

To make matters worse, Big Oil companies fortified their own infrastructure against climate change, factoring in the anticipated rise in temperatures and sea levels when deciding how and where to build their own infrastructure. This revealing course of conduct gives the game away. They used their knowledge of climate change to protect their future profits while preventing the American people from acting to protect our collective future. They used their knowledge of climate change for purposes of corporate planning, but publicly denied the reality of climate change for purposes of national planning.

This contradiction is at the heart of our hearing today. **The oil industry's denial campaign placed private corporate interests above the national public interest, and now poor and minority communities are bearing the brunt of the devastating impacts of climate change.**

Climate change has already had a disproportionate effect on low-income communities and communities of color, from New Orleans to Puerto Rico, who are often said to suffer "first and worst." Rising sea levels threaten to displace coastal and island communities. Government efforts are already underway to relocate Native American tribes in Louisiana and Alaska whose lands are vanishing into the ocean. Immigrants from Central America are migrating here to escape famine and drought caused by global warming.

Urban neighborhoods suffer disproportionately from rising temperatures. In Chairman Cummings' hometown of Baltimore, lower-income areas of the city were as much as 6 degrees hotter than cooler, wealthier, tree-lined neighborhoods. Hurricanes and wildfires are increasing in frequency and intensity, trapping poor people who cannot afford to evacuate or who struggle to rebuild their lives after losing everything in floods and flames. In short, climate change produces the most devastating effects on those who can least afford it.

The decades-long denial campaign has twisted and perverted our democracy. By funding climate denial and lobbying against government action, Big Oil has not only achieved a loud and distorting voice in the climate change debate. It has also deprived voters and policymakers of the materials and ability necessary to make informed decisions about the most fundamental challenge to human existence. James Madison said "a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." The people have been denied the power that knowledge gives, with means they have been governed by Big Oil.

We are thankfully beginning to see momentum shifting towards action to prevent the further destruction of our planet, but **we must remain wary of the feel-good commercials and empty promises from oil companies that are still intent on deceiving the American public.** Exxon and their corporate allies are continuing to fund climate denialism and explore new oil fields to exploit, even as the warnings from scientists grow increasingly dire.

In closing, I want to return to the words of Elijah Cummings. At a climate change hearing in this Committee in April, Elijah noted that the "true measure of leadership is whether we leave the world better for our children and our grandchildren and those yet unborn than we found it. Each day that we fail to act on climate change, we are risking the health and security of future generations." In order to understand and confront the crisis we are facing, we must recognize the disastrous deception that brought us to the brink. As we contemplate how to stop the destruction of our planet, the oil industry appears committed to perpetuating its deception. But I challenge everyone here today to answer Elijah's call. Will we allow climate denial to continue robbing our children of their destiny and the dreams? No, we will not do that. We will find the truth, and the truth will start the process of setting us free. If we act with courage and resolve, the truth will give us a second chance to get it right.