

Fossil Free for Health Policy Brief: Call for Action, Background, and Detailed Policy Action Agenda

This *Fossil Free for Health* Policy Brief provides context, background, detailed recommendations, and references in support of the [Fossil Free for Health Policy Action Agenda](#).

A Call for Action

As individuals and organizations, we represent U.S. health professionals, health workers, health organizations and systems, and health education institutions across the spectrum of public health, environmental health, mental health, and health care. We have dedicated our lives to improving and protecting health. In our work, we already see the terrible impacts of fossil fuel pollution and climate change on our patients and communities, and we fear the steeply mounting toll. **We believe that all people have the right to a healthy environment and a stable climate, now and in the future.**¹

Air pollution from fossil fuels directly causes millions of deaths every year, and fossil fuel emissions are the dominant cause of climate change – the greatest health challenge of this century.² We have an opportunity to reap immediate and ongoing health benefits and save countless lives by moving as rapidly as possible away from dirty, polluting fossil fuels to pollution-free, renewable energy.³ To do so requires that we accelerate our investments in healthy, non-combustion energy, restrict extraction and use of fossil fuels, and support the health of people and communities in this transition.⁴ Yet the fossil fuel industry is working to actively block progress on each of these fronts.⁵ This means that moving forward with necessary speed also requires taking policy actions to limit the power and influence of the fossil fuel industry, as was done with the tobacco industry.

Background

As the health burden of fossil fuels grows and the human impacts of the climate health emergency accelerate, the urgent need for swift action becomes ever clearer. **We are calling for immediate and comprehensive action by all elected officials and policymakers at every level of government, working with communities, civil society, non-profit organizations, the health sector, and businesses, to protect people from health-harming fossil fuels by adopting and implementing the policies in this U.S. *Fossil Free for Health* Policy Action Agenda.**

The Problem

Fossil fuels have created a public health crisis. Air pollution from the combustion of coal, oil, and gas is killing people: globally an estimated 5 to 8.7 million people die prematurely each year due to air pollution from fossil fuel use, including about 350,000 premature deaths each year in the U.S.⁶ Toxic air, water, and soil pollution from mining, fracking, drilling, refining, and burning fossil fuels for energy is also associated with asthma and respiratory disease, heart disease and strokes, lung and other cancers, and effects on brain and neurocognitive function.⁷ Fossil fuel pollution is especially harmful to babies and children, increasing the likelihood of premature births and low birth weight, affecting children's ability to learn, and causing childhood asthma.⁸

The production and burning of fossil fuels is the primary cause of climate change, the greatest threat to human health in the 21st century. Fossil fuels are by far the largest contributor to global climate change, accounting for over 75 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions.⁹ Climate change threatens the stable climatic conditions that have allowed our current economic and societal systems to develop and human civilizations to flourish.¹⁰ Climate change causes extreme heat events, storms, flooding, droughts, and wildfires.¹¹ These in turn cause deaths, injuries, and a myriad of serious illnesses including heart, lung, and kidney disease, vector and water-borne illnesses, adverse impacts on pregnant people and babies, mental health impacts, particularly in youth, as well as forced displacement, shortages of food and water, and related exacerbation of war and conflict.¹²

The United States has outsized responsibility for ending the era of fossil fuels, and has unparalleled economic and political power to do so. The U.S. is the largest historic emitter of greenhouse gasses, the largest producer of oil and gas, and the top oil and gas exporter to other countries.¹³ While recent legislation (i.e. Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act) and market dynamics are driving rapid adoption of healthier energy technologies, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise.¹⁴ More robust government policy and investment is required to not only accelerate this transition, but also to rapidly reduce production and export of fossil fuels, allowing us to meet our climate and health goals.¹⁵

The health crises of fossil fuel pollution and climate change affect everyone, but some people and communities are disproportionately affected.¹⁶ People with low incomes, communities of color, Indigenous people and tribal communities, immigrants, communities heavily burdened by pollution, unsheltered people, and fossil fuel and outdoor workers are disproportionately harmed by fossil fuel pollution and climate change, due to historical and ongoing structural inequalities, economic injustice, and racism. Children, pregnant people, older adults, and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses are at high risk of harm from climate change because of greater physiological susceptibility and greater challenges in responding and adapting.

The Opportunity

Ending fossil fuel pollution and greenhouse gas emissions provides an unprecedented opportunity for direct, immediate, and ongoing health benefits.¹⁷ It is increasingly technologically feasible and economically advantageous to move rapidly away from harmful fossil fuel energy and towards pollution-free, renewable energy, such as wind and solar.¹⁸ The window to reduce the harms of climate change is rapidly narrowing, but there is still time to prevent untold deaths and suffering.¹⁹ Each additional tenth of a degree of warming that we avert will reduce damage to millions of people's lives and health.²⁰ Limiting warming to 1.5°C rather than 2°C will save the lives of an estimated 150 million people who would otherwise die as a result of the fossil fuel air pollution causing that additional warming.²¹ The estimated U.S. health costs of air pollution and climate change already far exceed \$800 billion per year.²² Limiting fossil fuel combustion could save roughly 1.4 million lives over the next 20 years from improved air quality, and would yield estimated monetized health benefits in the tens of trillions of dollars this century.²³ **The faster we act, the better off humanity will be.**

Recognizing and fully including the voice, knowledge, and power of the people and communities most affected by fossil fuel pollution and climate change will ensure that these groups are full partners in policy development and decision-making, enabling our response to the climate health emergency to center equity and justice and redress historical health inequities.²⁴

The Fossil Fuel Industry

The fossil fuel industry, its leaders, and the politicians they support are actively impeding efforts to protect our health from fossil fuel pollution and slow or stop progress on climate change.²⁵ Fossil fuel companies like Exxon and Chevron are using their enormous profits to pay politicians, lobbyists, trade associations, and front groups to perpetuate the use of fossil fuels at any cost and to mislead and deceive the public.²⁶ Industry trade associations spent \$2 billion over 10 years to block climate policies; numerous former oil industry lobbyists now work on climate-related issues in high-ranking Congressional staff positions.²⁷

Fossil fuel companies are using the tobacco industry playbook to vigorously fight efforts to address fossil fuel pollution and climate change.²⁸ The fossil fuel industry has known for decades that fossil fuel pollution causes climate change as well as significant health harm.²⁹ They are building on decades of deception to keep the American people from knowing the magnitude and cost of the health and environmental harms they are causing.³⁰ Using the same strategies as the tobacco industry, the fossil fuel industry has spent billions of dollars on a well-documented, coordinated disinformation and lobbying campaign to fight action on climate and air pollution, including outright climate denial, sowing doubt about climate science, greenwashing, supporting false solutions that perpetuate the use of fossil fuels, and raising fear about climate solutions.³¹

The fossil fuel industry is undeserving of credibility or legitimacy. Millions of deaths have been averted since the health community summoned the courage to confront big tobacco to protect our patients.³² It is time for us to summon similar moral clarity and courage to advocate for a future free of fossil fuel pollution. Moving forward on the essential, life-saving energy transition will require actively challenging the social and political license of the fossil fuel industry. It means limiting not only our use of fossil fuels, but also the role of the fossil fuel industry in public decision-making.³³

The policy agenda outlined below provides a roadmap to protect and promote health in the face of the interconnected fossil fuel and climate health crises, requiring policy change to advance the following actions:

- Tell the truth about the health harms of fossil fuels, make polluters pay, and hold the fossil fuel industry accountable for its inequitable harms.
- Stop making the problem worse and accelerate a just transition to an equitable pollution-free, renewable energy economy.
- Protect people and advance healthy, equitable, resilient communities.

Fossil Free for Health: A Policy Action Agenda

Tell the Truth About Fossil Fuels, Make Polluters Pay, and Hold the Fossil Fuel Industry Accountable for its Inequitable Harms

1. Counter Fossil Fuel Industry Disinformation and Tell the Truth about the Harms of Fossil Fuels.

Prior public health campaigns such as the tobacco control campaign demonstrated the power of counter-marketing and media advocacy in effectively eroding public approval of health-harming industries, building demand for health action.³⁴ We must use these proven public health strategies to proactively counter fossil fuel industry disinformation. Eroding the social license and public approval of the fossil fuel industry is a key step in enabling policymakers to take strong action to phase out fossil fuels.

Key policies include:

- a. **Fund, develop, and implement a large-scale coordinated public health counter-marketing and media advocacy campaign**, building on lessons from tobacco control.
- b. **Issue a Surgeon General's public advisory on the health harms of fossil fuels** in order to inform and guide the American public.³⁵
- c. **Enforce and expand rules on misleading fossil fuel industry advertising**, expand liability for deceptive claims, and restrict advertising.³⁶

- d. Provide **health warning labels** on consumer products that expose people to pollution from methane gas and nitrogen oxides (e.g. gas stoves, furnaces, water heaters).³⁷

2. **Make Polluters Pay: Hold fossil fuel companies accountable for the health harms caused by their products.**

Those who cause damage should pay for it.³⁸ The costs of the health, environmental, and climate harms caused by fossil fuel pollution and greenhouse gas emissions are immense – the health costs of air pollution from oil and gas production alone are estimated at \$77 billion annually for the U.S.³⁹ These “externalized” costs are borne by communities, government, households, and businesses, instead of by the fossil fuel industry.⁴⁰ Holding fossil fuel companies accountable will provide financial resources for climate adaptation, compensation for pollution harms, and renewable energy investments.

Key policies include:

- a. **Require the parties responsible for pollution to pay for the full remediation of environmental and health harms associated with pollution from all stages of the coal, oil, and gas chain** – from extraction to combustion – including pollution from currently operating, abandoned, and orphaned fossil fuel, plastics, and petrochemical infrastructure.⁴¹
- b. **Require fossil fuel corporations to pay into a U.S. climate fund** to support climate mitigation, resilience, and emergency response efforts, especially in communities disproportionately affected by fossil fuel pollution and climate change.⁴²
- c. **Ensure that the U.S. meets its pledges to the Green Climate Fund** to enable developing nations to accelerate the energy transition and build climate resilience.⁴³
- d. **Incorporate the full cost of health and environmental harms from fossil fuels, plastic and petrochemical products, and climate change into the social cost of carbon** that is used to quantify the benefits and costs of climate policies.⁴⁴
- e. **Use litigation to hold fossil fuel companies accountable** by bringing public lawsuits on behalf of governments at all levels and supporting legal efforts to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable for the costs to the public for its health, environmental, and climate damages.⁴⁵

Stop Making the Problem Worse and Accelerate a Just Transition to an Equitable Pollution-Free, Renewable Energy Economy

3. Prohibit New and Expanded Fossil Fuel Infrastructure to Stop Making the Problem Worse.

The International Energy Agency and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have stated that new fossil fuel infrastructure is incompatible with limiting global warming to 1.5°C, the “danger line” above which the risk of catastrophic impacts increases.⁴⁶ New fossil fuel infrastructure locks in harmful fossil fuel carbon emissions and pollution over the lifetime of the infrastructure.⁴⁷ Despite this reality, in 2023, global investments in drilling, exploration, and extraction alone exceeded \$500 billion.⁴⁸ Known fossil fuel reserves contain ten times the amount of carbon we can burn to stay within the 1.5°C climate goal.⁴⁹ Globally, governments are still planning to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 that would be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, between 2005 and 2019, a quarter of U.S. fossil fuel production came from federal lands and waters.⁵¹ Avoiding new fossil fuel infrastructure will bring innumerable health benefits; for example, electrification of buildings decreases exposure to allergens and pollutants linked with asthma and adverse reproductive outcomes.⁵² It's time to stop making the problem worse.

Key policies include:

- a. **Halt new and expanded fossil fuel infrastructure**, through policy tools including leasing, permitting, lawsuits, and prohibition and discontinuation of public funding or incentives, including the following types of facilities:
 - i. Upstream, midstream, and downstream production such as oil and gas exploration and drilling; coal mining; pipelines; export terminals; oil and gas fracking and related infrastructure; and petroleum and petrochemical processing and refining facilities;
 - ii. Coal, oil, and gas power plants;
 - iii. Gas transmission and distribution pipelines; and
 - iv. Carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) and related infrastructure (except in the most hard-to-decarbonize industries).
- b. **Prohibit new leases for fossil fuel exploration and extraction** on public lands and waters.
- c. **Establish requirements for all-electric new buildings.**

4. Equitably Phase Out Fossil Fuel Extraction, Export, Refining, and Use.

A rapid, managed, and just decline to near-zero in the production, refining, combustion, and use of fossil fuels is required to reduce air pollution deaths and avert the worst impacts of climate change.⁵³ A just and people-centered fossil fuel phase out process requires complementary coordinated federal planning and community-driven

planning, leadership, and power, in order to ensure the energy transition minimizes economic disruption and optimizes equitable benefits for affected workers and frontline communities.⁵⁴ The phase out must begin by immediately addressing the sources of greatest pollution such as coal power plants, since coal is the most carbon intensive fossil fuel and air pollution from coal is twice as deadly as that from other fossil fuel combustion.⁵⁵ Phasing out fossil fuel vehicles and appliances would substantially reduce outdoor and indoor air pollution associated with significant adverse health outcomes.⁵⁶ U.S. progress on fossil fuel phase out is undermined by the enormous expansion in gas and oil exports, due in part to the 2015 repeal of a 40-year old ban on exporting crude oil.⁵⁷

Key policies include:

- a. **Develop community plans** through worker- and community-led planning and engagement processes to set timelines, determine phase-out prioritization, and provide investments and support for communities and workers.
- b. **Decommission all coal power plants** as rapidly as possible; follow with a rapid and orderly planned decommissioning of other fossil fuel power plants. Decommissioning must include full remediation of all power plant sites.⁵⁸
- c. **Reinstate ban on crude oil exports** and phase out other fossil fuel exports, including liquefied natural gas (LNG).
- d. **Rapidly phase out existing fossil fuel extraction, refining, production, and transportation** on public lands and waters.
- e. **Rapidly phase out sales of fossil fuel vehicles and appliances** (e.g., stoves, water heaters, furnaces, boilers).⁵⁹

5. **Avoid Approaches that Perpetuate the Extraction and Use of Fossil Fuels.**

The fossil fuel industry and its allies are financially motivated to continue the use of fossil fuels.⁶⁰ The industry has lobbied extensively for “false solutions”: policies and technologies that are costly, unproven at scale, and do nothing to address the direct health impacts of fossil fuels, especially in frontline communities.⁶¹ These distractions and false solutions include carbon offsets, carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), and “blue” hydrogen from methane gas.⁶² Economists estimate that reaching climate targets through heavy dependence on CCS would cost \$30 trillion more than through renewables, efficiency, and electrification.⁶³

In addition, the fossil fuel industry is investing heavily in harmful pivots, increasing production of fossil-fuel based plastics and petrochemicals as a strategy to maintain a robust market for oil and gas.⁶⁴ Yet production, use, recycling, and waste disposal from plastics and petrochemicals release significant greenhouse gas emissions and cause a myriad of environmental and health harms to workers and frontline communities.⁶⁵

Key policies include:

- a. Use governmental policy and investments to **prioritize direct greenhouse gas and toxics emissions reductions**, rather than investing in false solutions.
- b. **End subsidies and support for technologies that prolong the use of fossil fuels**, such as blue hydrogen and CCS.
- c. Commit to a **robust Global Plastics Treaty**.⁶⁶
- d. Rapidly **phase down the production and use of single-use plastics**, including through plastic bag bans and packaging restrictions.
- e. **Restrict expansion of plastics production** facilities and infrastructure.
- f. **Make plastic and petrochemical producers responsible for lifecycle impacts** and end-of-life management through extended producer responsibility laws.

6. End Public Investments and Tax Breaks for Fossil Fuels.

Subsidizing fossil fuels while trying to decarbonize is counterproductive and dangerous. U.S. taxpayers pay tens to hundreds of billions per year to subsidize the fossil fuel industry, while the health costs of air pollution and climate change already exceed \$800 billion per year and are surging.⁶⁷ Public employee pensions are managed and primarily funded by the government; many invest billions of dollars in fossil fuels, funding climate change as well as risking litigation, declining asset value, and stranded assets.⁶⁸

Key policies include:

- a. **End tax breaks that support the fossil fuel industry:** End tax breaks for fossil fuel exploration, development, and production, as well as for new technologies that enhance or prolong fossil fuel extraction, refining, and use.
- b. **Support public sector pension fund divestment** from the fossil fuel industry.
- c. **End policies that enable fossil fuel distributors to levy mandatory fees on customers** to fund industry organizations that advocate against the clean energy transition.⁶⁹

7. Accelerate Adoption of Pollution-Free, Renewable Energy.

Rapid technological advancements and cost reductions make it increasingly affordable to meet growing energy demand while phasing out harmful fossil fuels.⁷⁰ By redirecting subsidies from fossil fuels to renewable energy, investing in research and development, planning for grid transformation, and prioritizing equity and frontline communities, we can move much faster toward pollution-free, renewable energy.⁷¹

Key policies include:

- a. **Redirect existing fossil fuel subsidies to invest in pollution-free, renewable energy** – such as wind, solar, and geothermal – and related storage and infrastructure.

- b. **Support adequate financing and comprehensive planning** for the technologies and infrastructure needed to transition away from fossil fuels in the energy sector, including resilient transmission and electrical grid infrastructure, large scale and distributed renewables, microgrids, and battery and other energy storage, with an emphasis on community-owned renewable energy projects.
- c. **Establish timelines for implementation of public procurement and operations policies** that require purchases of energy and vehicles to be fossil free, electrify publicly owned buildings, and move toward fossil-free supply chains.⁷²
- d. **Establish or strengthen ambitious state and federal standards for pollution-free, renewable electricity aligned with achieving the 1.5°C goal**, with binding timelines for implementation.⁷³

8. **Accelerate the Transformation of Transportation and Land Use, Buildings and Housing, Industry, Agriculture, and Other Sectors to Reduce Dependence on Fossil Fuels.**

Actions to reduce fossil fuel pollution will bring immediate health and economic benefits to families and communities, by reducing diseases caused by air pollution and increasing access to healthier transportation and housing options.⁷⁴ Replacing gas with electric appliances in California homes alone would produce \$3.5 billion in annual health benefits from cleaner air; weatherization saves hundreds of dollars for households each year.⁷⁵ Agriculture is responsible for about 11% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and significant air and water pollution; our current industrial farm system promotes calorie-dense unhealthy foods.⁷⁶

Key policies include:

- a. **Support transportation pollution reduction** through investments in dense and affordable housing, safe and accessible bicycling and walking networks, convenient and affordable public transportation, electric vehicle (EV) adoption, affordable, accessible EV charging facilities, and non-polluting trucks and ships.⁷⁷
- b. **Strengthen energy efficiency standards and zero emissions targets** across sectors, including for vehicles, appliances, boilers, and other industrial equipment.
- c. **Support zero emission new and existing buildings** through strong building standards and codes and fully funded energy efficiency and weatherization assistance programs. Fund or incentivize replacement of gas appliances with electric appliances, particularly for retrofitting existing homes and buildings.
- d. **Support the transition to sustainable, regenerative agricultural and forestry practices** that avoid synthetic fossil-fuel based fertilizers and employ electric machinery and non-polluting approaches.

Protect People and Advance Healthy, Equitable, Resilient Communities

9. **Protect People from Exposure to Toxic Fossil Fuel Pollution.**

People are exposed to fossil fuel pollution at work, in their communities, and in their homes. The best way to protect people from fossil fuel pollution is to rapidly phase out the extraction and use of fossil fuels. In the meantime, we must limit exposures to existing fossil fuel pollution and rebuild healthy community environments and rebuild healthy community environments.

Key policies include:

- a. **Reduce exposures to toxic fossil fuel pollution and safety risks across the fossil fuel life cycle.** Implement and enforce stricter federal and state pollution standards to limit toxic exposures and safety risks, including outdoor and indoor air quality standards, worker health and safety protections, water and soil discharge and pollution standards, standards regulating pipelines and transportation of fossil fuels, hydrogen gas, and carbon dioxide, and consumer product standards. Protect health by eliminating and limiting exposures to fossil fuel pollution through implementation of the full hierarchy of controls, including mandating and enforcing these controls.⁷⁸ This includes creating and implementing evidence-based setbacks or buffer requirements between polluting sources and where people live, play, work, and seek medical care.⁷⁹
- b. **Prioritize actions to reduce exposures to fossil fuel pollution in pollution-burdened communities, particularly those near industry, refining, and ports.** Develop strategies to prevent further exacerbation of cumulative impacts in these communities, for example by prohibiting new or expanded polluting facilities and requiring clean-up and remediation of polluted sites.
- c. **Strengthen requirements for monitoring pollution emissions** across the fossil fuel lifecycle. Require pollution monitors on the fence line of all major sources of air pollution and ensure public access to monitoring data. Require sensors on gas appliances within buildings, with automatic shutoff devices if pollution levels are above health-based standards.
- d. **Invest in reclamation of land from fossil fuel infrastructure and in restoration** and expansion of green space and tree canopy in pollution-burdened communities.⁸⁰

10. **Support Workers in the Transition to a Fossil-Free Economy.**

A sustainable and equitable transition to a fossil-free economy requires that we ensure high quality jobs and inclusive pathways to opportunity and economic mobility for workers who have been left out of today's economy, while protecting workers from major losses in living standards resulting from the energy transition.⁸¹

Key policies include:

- a. **Invest in a just transition for workers and communities** adversely impacted by job loss related to the phase out of fossil fuel use, including through workforce development and local hiring, community investment, income replacement, and maintenance of pension and health benefits (including black lung benefits) for displaced workers.⁸²
- b. **Ensure that jobs created in a fossil-free economy pay a living wage and provide family-sustaining benefits** and that employers in the new economy comply with labor and environmental laws, including support for collective bargaining rights and unionization.⁸³
- c. **Provide education, training, and economic opportunities** to low-wage workers to ensure family-sustaining jobs in the new energy economy, for example through increased funding to link underinvested communities to quality jobs through apprenticeship programs and a fully funded Civilian Climate Corps.⁸⁴

11. Support Community Health, Redress Health and Racial Inequities, and Protect the Most Vulnerable.

People in every community are affected by the health harms of fossil fuel pollution and the climate crisis. Communities suffering from the legacies of historic disinvestment, marginalization, and environmental racism confront higher rates of pollution burdens, stark health inequities, and limited resources to build healthy communities.⁸⁵ The use of health impact assessments can optimize health benefits and minimize health harms associated with new technologies and infrastructure.⁸⁶

Key policies include:

- a. **Prioritize investments in environmental justice communities**, for example, through implementation of the Justice 40 initiative and community-directed economic development and investment sufficient to remediate past harms and support resilient communities.⁸⁷
- b. **Invest in community-led climate adaptation and resilience.** Ensure that sensitive groups have access to clean air shelters, cooling and heating, and electricity and health care during climate-related extreme events. Ensure protections from disconnection from utility access due to difficulty paying. Prioritize resilience centers in schools and daycare, clinics and hospitals, libraries, and senior and community centers.
- c. Ensure the **costs of transition and of climate change are equitably distributed** and that low income households are not burdened, for example with excessive utility bills or cost of replacing polluting fossil fuel appliances.⁸⁸

- d. **Do not replicate the harms to communities** of the existing fossil fuel economy in transitioning to new systems and technologies. Establish clear mechanisms to ensure that harm is avoided from the build-out and implementation of new and existing technologies, industries, facilities, mines, and infrastructure through: regulation of design and operations; comprehensive health, equity, and cumulative impact assessments; siting restrictions; and strict pollution control and monitoring.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Leading health authorities across the world agree that fossil fuel pollution and resultant climate change is the dominant threat to human health in the 21st century, and that society is not moving at the pace the threat demands. The policy recommendations that comprise this Call to Action provide a roadmap to address the health harms of fossil fuels. We call on local, state, and national leaders to act now to stop fossil fuel pollution, for the health of our communities here in the United States and around the world, and for the health of our children and future generations.

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