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Pay up, Chevron: BC cities, towns challenged to hold fossil fuel industry accountable for climate impacts

VANCOUVER, BC, Coast Salish Territories – More than 50 community groups from across BC have signed onto an open letter arguing that fossil fuel companies owe BC communities for their fair share of the impacts of climate change. The letter was delivered to all 190 municipalities and regional districts in BC, asking them to demand accountability from the fossil fuel industry, up to and including considering lawsuits against Chevron and other big fossil fuel companies.

“Fighting climate change only works when everyone does their fair share. The fossil fuel industry expects communities to pay the costs to adapt and rebuild from climate impacts, while they pocket hundreds of billions of dollars of profits,” said Andrew Gage, Staff Counsel with West Coast Environmental Law. “When communities demand accountability from fossil fuel companies, the industry will finally have an incentive to get out of the way of those who want to build a sustainable future – or, better yet, to start working with us.”

The open letter references the work of carbon accountant Richard Heede, who has calculated that pollution from the operations and products of the three largest fossil fuel companies alone (Chevron, Exxon and Saudi Aramco) represent almost 10% of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere today. Just 90 entities – mostly fossil fuel companies – are responsible for about 2/3 of the historic greenhouse gas emissions.

Montana Burgess, Executive Director of the West Kootenay EcoSociety signed on to the letter because her rural region is already experiencing the impacts of carbon pollution.

“Thanks to global fossil fuel pollution, our communities are having to prepare for winters with less snow and much more rain. We’ve seen how this creates landslides, drought and forest fires at home, in the West Kootenays. Right now, ordinary people are paying for these costly disasters. Each community needs to do its part to transition off fossil fuels and get onto 100% renewable energy, but until Chevron, Exxon and the other big oil companies take responsibility for the harm caused by their products, we won’t get there on the global scale,” Burgess said.

The signatories to the letter – which include representatives of the environmental, health, human rights, women’s rights and faith sectors – point out that BC communities are already paying significant costs for the impacts of climate change. In addition to direct impacts – such as wildfires, flooding and the destruction of forests by the mountain pine beetle – communities also faced with the costs of preparing for expected impacts, such as paying to build infrastructure that can withstand rising sea levels, extreme weather, droughts and other climate impacts.

The Province of BC has estimated that Metro Vancouver Municipalities will need to spend \$9.5 billion between now and 2100 to address rising sea-levels (about \$100 million per year on average).

West Coast Environmental Law and many of the signatories are hoping to engage with and support local governments who pursue fossil fuel company accountability. West Coast has launched a website – climatelawinourhands.org – providing resources to help local governments draft letters to the fossil fuel industry, including template letters and fossil fuel company addresses. West Coast is also offering local governments legal research and support related to possible litigation against the fossil fuel companies.

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View the open letter to BC local governments at: <http://bit.ly/2jbYEjd>

For more information, please contact:

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[Additional quotes from signatories listed below]

Quotes from signatories around the province:

"If the fossil fuel industry is prepared to endanger the integrity of creation by contributing so directly to changing the climate of the planet, they should at least be equally prepared to hold themselves accountable. Some of their profits come at the expense of communities and they should pay those costs."

- *Robert Hart, Knox United Church, Terrace*

"Just as the tobacco companies are being forced to pay for the health costs they tried to hide, fossil fuel companies will be held to account for the damages from climate change. With a climate denier in the White House, it is now more important than ever for Canadians to take on a leadership role in forcing carbon polluters to stop putting communities at risk and to pay for the harm already being felt."

- *Keith Stewart, Greenpeace Canada*

"Local governments are already on the front lines dealing with climate impacts like wildfires and drought. Making polluters pay will relieve the burden on local taxpayers and businesses."

- *Caitlyn Vernon, Sierra Club BC*

"Protecting our environment is one of the ways we protect our health and that of future generations. British Columbia has an important responsibility to all Canadians to ensure that our energy policies are good for the health of populations and the planet."

- *Cecelia Velasco, Public Health Association of BC*

"For too long pollution profiteers have ignored climate change while expecting the rest of us to pay the tab. Now it's time for them to pay up. Adapting to a warming world will cost BC communities billions of dollars — an impossible price tag that would rob us of money for transit, parks and just about everything else. Taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for the fossil fuel industry's willful negligence."

- *Peter McCartney, Wilderness Committee*

"The fossil fuel industry began in earnest 150 years ago. But times have changed, and now we've run the course with fossil fuels, and it's time to move on to better forms of energy, because now the harms far exceed the benefits. Those who cling to the old ways need to be persuaded that they must do their part to bring about this transition. If persuasion fails, then legal action is the obvious next step."

- *Warren Bell, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment*

"As people committed to the life and teachings of Jesus, we are challenged by his readiness to call the powerful to be accountable for their misuse and abuse of power. In the same spirit, we believe fossil fuel industries which profit from intensive greenhouse gas emissions should be financially accountable for the effects they are causing on our climate and the world's poorest and most vulnerable. We encourage other people of faith and concerned citizens across BC to join hands in demanding these companies take responsibility for causing harmful climate impacts."

- *Jason Wood, EarthKeepers*

"Climate change will affect all of us, and it will certainly affect salmon and the communities they feed. We urge our local governments to exercise every tool available, including the law, to demand accountability from the fossil fuel industry."

- *Heather Forbes, Salmon Coast Field Station Society*

"Fossil fuel companies reap enormous profits from the remains of the ancient creatures and plants that they dig out of the ground as oil or other fossil fuels. The cost of cleaning up the mess left behind is usually paid for by the public. This is an untenable situation and the fossil fuel companies know it. They should be required to provide compensation for the costs associated with the environmental effects of their activities which contribute to the ever more extreme climate which the planet is suffering."

- *Gayle Neilson, Sunshine Coast Conservation Association*