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Opinion

Doppelt: Fossil Fuel Industry Exploits People of Color

By Bob Doppelt

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Our nation's history is filled with examples of the rich and powerful preying on low income residents and minorities. The fossil fuel industry is doing it again by faking concern for the welfare of disadvantaged residents and people of color, while simultaneously promoting practices and products that harm them, the environment and climate.

That is the message of the new NAACP report, "Fossil Fueled Foolery: An Illustrated Primer on the Top 10 Manipulation Tactics of the Fossil Fuel Industry." It was released because, as Kathy Eglund, Chair of the NAACP National Board Committee on Environmental and Climate Justice said, "One of the most duplicitous strategies of the fossil fuel industry is manipulating messaging which feigns concern for the welfare of low income and communities of color."

According to the report, one way the industry does this is by "investing in efforts that undermine democracy." Many companies have, for example, funded groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council, which develops model policies that result in voter suppression, disproportionately disenfranchising communities of color.

The industry also aggressively finances political campaigns and pressures politicians to oppose energy efficiency and clean energy regulations and promote destructive practices like fracking for natural

gas and building more pipelines “that they falsely claim are environmentally safe.”

Additionally, the report said the industry funds the development of scientific reports intended to “deny or understate the negative impacts of fossil fuels”...“discredit the practicality and value of clean and renewable energy systems”... and refute the very existence of human-caused climate change.

Similarly, the industry denies their operations harm people of color, deflects responsibility for climate change, and often “shifts the blame to the very communities they pollute.”

Further, the report says the carbon industry tries to “pacify or co-opt community leaders and organizations and misrepresent the interests and opinions of communities,” “praise(s) false solutions while claiming that real solutions are impractical or impossible,” and some deceptively claim they embrace renewables while actually trying to control the new energy economy.

The truth, says the NAACP, is that “fossil fuels emissions kill — especially communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities.”

It is contemptible enough that the industry continues to harm civilization and the planet by blocking action on climate disruption. It is even more infuriating to realize that to do so, they abuse low income communities and people of color. England said it well: “The unmitigated gall, to use as pawns the very demographics that they have caused such disproportionate harm to through their polluting practices, reflects the low levels to which they will sink. Greed has no moral or ethical bounds.”

The NAACP report concludes that to protect low income communities, people of color, and our planet, it is essential — and possible — to rapidly transition to a clean renewable energy economy.

That's the truth to remember the next time proponents of the Jordan Cove gas pipeline project, NW Natural, ExxonMobil and other fossil fuel companies claim their facilities and products are benign and essential.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for the Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.