

Big Oil sows confusion, reaps Ike

By Bob Doppelt

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America has the technological capacity today to increase the health and well-being of each citizen many times over.

This should be an era of excitement, hope and prosperity. Yet few people feel this way. The future seems clouded by problems, not opportunity. Systemic troubles are becoming ever more evident.

The recent destructive Atlantic hurricanes and the Wall Street meltdown are the latest ordeals that give people a deepening sense that something is fundamentally wrong. Paradoxically, these events also provide insights into the deep-seated changes needed to right the ship, resolve global warming, and enhance prosperity.

It's ironic that Hurricane Ike struck the Houston area, the epicenter of the U.S. oil industry. Natural disasters can occur anywhere at any time, this is hurricane season, and Houston has been hit before.

But as we sow, so shall we reap. The carbon dioxide generated by the use of oil is one of the primary causes of human-induced global climate change. And the oil industry has been a primary sponsor of efforts to confuse the public about global warming and delay climate legislation.

Climate scientists say it's premature to make a direct link between this year's hurricanes and human-induced global warming. That's because hurricanes respond to their immediate environment, not rising global average temperatures.

However, a study by Kerry Emanuel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology revealed that the damaging power of hurricanes has increased 70 percent in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans over the past 30-year period.

In another recent report, Emanuel determined that future North Atlantic hurricanes are likely to be more intense as a result of global warming.

This later conclusion is consistent with the research of prominent federal climate scientist Thomas Knutson who found that, although their frequency may not increase, global warming likely will cause future hurricanes to be more intense on average and have higher rainfall rates. This year's hurricanes seem consistent with these patterns.

Despite the growing danger to people, property and planet, big oil companies such as ExxonMobil, which makes its home in Texas, have sponsored a sophisticated disinformation campaign in order to prevent meaningful steps to resolve global climate change.

Last year, the Union of Concerned Scientists reported how Exxon – Mobil has acted much like the tobacco industry did when it tried to mislead the public about the scientific evidence linking smoking to lung cancer and heart disease.

The union's study said ExxonMobil purposefully has manufactured uncertainty on global warming by raising doubts about even the most indisputable scientific evidence.

One tactic is to fund a network of seemingly independent conservative "think tanks" to promote its message and confuse the public.

ExxonMobil also funds spokesmen and –women who misrepresent peer-reviewed scientific findings, cherry-pick facts, and publish and republish non-peer reviewed works to persuade the media and citizens that doubt still exists among scientists.

Finally, the Union of Concerned Scientists report found that Exxon – Mobil has used its unprecedented access to the Bush administration and key members of Congress to eviscerate federal regulatory oversight, distort environmental laws and block new climate policies.

ExxonMobil is not alone. Other oil companies and giant corporations have participated.

One lesson from Hurricane Ike is now clear. When misbehaving corporations and their front groups purposely mislead the public without challenge, and when these organizations are allowed to infiltrate government and block vital environmental safeguards, global warming will worsen. People today, future generations — and eventually those companies themselves — will suffer.

Wall Street's financial troubles provide a remarkably similar lesson. Analysts agree that the risky investments and predatory mortgage lending that caused the crisis are the result of unenforced lending laws, poor regulatory oversight and lack of transparency.

These conditions exist because big banks have rejected any and all proposals aimed at regulating them. They also have rebuffed antitrust measures.

Instead, many large financial institutions continually have claimed that prosperity depends on a dramatic reduction in regulatory oversight provided by "big government."

It is now clear that rather than enhancing economic well-being, that line of thinking has put us all at risk. Once again, we reap what we sow.

English historian Lord Acton once said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Government always must be carefully monitored to prevent excess. But just as importantly, big corporations must be regulated vigilantly, because when they are allowed to control and distort the flow of information and take over government, all of the creatures that inhabit Earth face grave danger.

Honest, credible scientific information, strong public policies and diligent regulatory oversight are essential if we hope to resolve systemic problems such as global climate change and financial excess and prosper as a nation.

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