

Fossil Fuel Advertising is Fuelling a Public Health Crisis: An Open Letter from Health Professionals in Canada



June 8, 2022

To:

The Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, Minister of Canadian Heritage
The Honourable Steven Guilbeault, P.C., M.P., Minister of Environment and Climate Change
The Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, P.C., M.P., Minister of Natural Resources
The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health
The Honourable Francois-Phillipe Champagne, P.C., M.P., Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development

On behalf of 34 health organizations representing 700,000 health professionals across Canada, we are writing to you because of our deep concern about the health impacts people are experiencing as a result of carbon pollution, and our strong conviction of the need for limits on advertising of fossil fuels products and industries to address this public health crisis.

The burning of fossil fuels – coal, oil, and gas – is the major driver of climate change and the biggest contributor to poor air quality. Climate change and air pollution are interconnected urgent public health emergencies, negatively affecting the physical health, quality of life, mental health, and longevity of people in Canada. As a new [Health Canada](#) report affirms, the health impacts of climate change related to rising temperatures and extreme heat, wildfires, and the expansion of zoonotic diseases into Canada are not just future concerns, but impacts already being experienced today. These impacts were exemplified by the nearly 600 people who lost their lives and many more who suffered from the climate change-fuelled heat dome and catastrophic flooding in British Columbia last year.

Fossil fuels are also leading causes of both indoor and outdoor air pollution. Up to [34,000 deaths](#) or 1 in 7 premature deaths in Canada are related to fossil fuel air pollution, while homes with [gas stoves](#) contain approximately 50 to 400 percent higher concentrations of NO₂ than those with electric stoves, often resulting in levels of air pollution inside our homes that would be illegal outdoors.

The evidence is clear that the production and combustion of fossil fuels represents a national public health problem of substantial and pressing concern. It sends people to the emergency room, it causes chronic illness, and it leads to premature deaths. Furthermore, such health impacts are distributed unequally amongst the population, disproportionately affecting Indigenous peoples, low-income communities, racialized communities, those with disabilities and chronic health conditions, women, the elderly, and children.

Given the scale of the health impacts already being felt, we urge the federal government to approach fossil fuel production and combustion with the same resolve, and the same tools, that were used to combat another public health crisis: the fight against tobacco.

Canada has long been a leader in tobacco control. Effective interventions that decrease smoking prevalence in Canada and around the world and save millions of lives include taxation, comprehensive advertising bans,

action against false or misleading claims by tobacco companies, as well as public information and education campaigns, including mandatory labelling.

Yet, to date, the federal government has only engaged some of the tools it wielded in the fight against tobacco in order to limit fossil fuel combustion and mitigate climate change. We acknowledge and support the federal government's use of a price on carbon pollution as one mechanism to decrease fossil fuel use, but now is the time to step up and lead with bold restrictions on the promotion and marketing of harmful fossil fuel products and industries that pollute the air, threaten Canadians' health, and represent the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada.

As the Ministers of Environment and Climate Change and Natural Resources recently [wrote](#): "We have to use every tool in the toolbox to eliminate carbon pollution as soon as possible."

Fossil fuel marketing and promotion is harmful to human and planetary health in three key ways:

1. Fossil fuel advertising creates demand for carbon intensive goods and services for which climate policies have clearly committed to curbing demand.

This is counter-productive. For example, we applaud that the government has invested \$1 billion to support zero emission vehicle adoption in light of its mandate to phase out the sale of gas-powered vehicles by 2035. Yet counter to this initiative, the automotive industry spent \$35.5 billion USD globally on car advertising in 2018, overwhelmingly in marketing gas-powered vehicles.

Up to 80% of money spent on car advertising in Canada is directed to promoting oversized vehicles that emit about a third more emissions than a standard-sized car. This advertising has led to a situation where [more than three quarters of new car purchases](#) in Canada are SUVs and we have the most polluting fleet of vehicles on the planet, according to the International Energy Agency. Emissions from these oversized vehicles have doubled in the past 30 years, undermining any reduction gains from increased fuel efficiency in the transport sector.

Reducing the number of fossil fuel-burning cars and trucks on roadways as soon as possible will save lives and make significant gains to health and well-being, as a recent [report](#) on traffic related air pollution shows. There is no reason to wait. To achieve zero emissions vehicle targets, restricting the advertising of gas-powered cars is a necessary complementary action that needs to be implemented immediately.

2. Fossil fuel misinformation obstructs climate action.

The Competition Act in Canada prohibits businesses from making false or misleading claims about products, services, or business interests, yet the fossil fuel and automotive industries have been engaging in campaigns of climate disinformation for decades. Previously this took the form of climate science denial. Increasingly, fossil fuel marketing centres on claims of environmental sustainability while their core business model and lobbying efforts continue to focus on expanding fossil fuel production and blocking the energy transition.

Canada's Competition Bureau has recently reaffirmed its commitment to protect consumers from misleading green claims and asked people to ["Look Out for Greenwashing"](#). But its guidance on such claims has been [archived](#) and "does not reflect the latest standards and evolving environmental concerns." Clearly this guidance is in urgent need of modernization. For example, fossil fuels can never

be [carbon neutral](#), natural gas is not clean, and claims to net zero must include the entire life cycle of the product.

According to the most recent IPCC report, misinformation from vested economic and political interests weakens public support for climate mitigation and adaptation policies and is one of the biggest barriers to effective climate action in Canada. Misuse of terms such as net zero and failure to present the life-cycle impact of fossil fuel products misinforms Canadians and hinders the transition to truly clean, renewable energy alternatives which are already affordable and within reach.

To ensure that the public has full and accurate information to make informed choices as citizens and consumers, Canada needs a robust regulatory framework for ensuring that ads are not misleading the public about environmental claims.

3. Fossil fuel advertising fails to disclose known health and environmental hazards

By not disclosing health and environmental dangers associated with their products, fossil fuel companies put lives at risk. Natural gas utilities tout gas as clean and encourage people to switch to gas-burning furnaces, fireplaces, and stoves. What they fail to disclose is the mounting evidence that children living in homes with gas stoves have up to a [42% increased risk of asthma](#), comparable to living [with a smoker](#).

High-profile anti-smoking campaigns and graphic disease warnings on cigarette packaging alert about the dangers of smoking. Similarly, Canadian broadcasters allot free time to public service announcements about the risks of alcohol. Yet there has not been a parallel effort to inform the public about the health and environmental risks of carbon pollution and other pollutants generated by the burning of fossil fuels.

As Canada's Net Zero Advisory Body recommends, public awareness of the environmental impacts of different technologies and co-benefits of net-zero actions are necessary to shift social norms. We were pleased to see that the Government of Canada's [Emissions Reduction Plan](#) acknowledges the need to address advertising (p.184) but we have learned from experience that more than encouragement and voluntary action is needed to protect lives. Beyond consumer preferences, this is about the public's right to know and companies' duty of care to disclose health and environmental risks.

Around the world, bold actions to address high carbon advertising and greenwashing are underway.

France has passed a [climate bill](#) that will ban advertising of all fossil fuels in 2022 and has banned advertising of cars with emissions above a certain threshold as of 2028. [Amsterdam](#) has banned fossil fuel, car, and aviation ads. Advertising watchdogs in countries such as [The Netherlands](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) are proactively pursuing false claims to carbon neutrality and sustainability. Norway, the global leader on electric vehicle adoption, has had a [ban](#) against advertising any gas-powered vehicle as green or environmentally friendly since 2007. Finally, in the United States, several state and municipal-based lawsuits against oil and gas companies, including Canada's [Encana](#), are alleging knowledge of the risks of climate change and failure to warn consumers.

We call on the Canadian government to show comparable leadership. As health care and public health professionals, with public and planetary health as our utmost priority, and drawing on the success of tobacco regulation, we call for:

- A comprehensive ban on advertising by fossil fuel industries, products, and services (such as gasoline and gas utilities) and internal combustion engine vehicles.

- A robust regulatory response to address misleading environmental claims by fossil fuel companies.
- Regulations mandating the disclosure of the health and environmental risks associated with fossil fuel production and use.

The fight to control tobacco is a reminder that we can achieve great things when faced with conclusive scientific evidence of a major public health threat. We now need the same clear-eyed policy leadership to tackle the public health threat posed by the production and combustion of fossil fuels.

As health professionals, we can attest to the immediate health benefits that a just energy transition would foster, and we stand ready to lend our full support to bring these public health recommendations to fruition. Canadians deserve no less.

Signatories:

1. Association Pour la Santé Publique du Québec
2. Asthma Canada
3. BC Hospital Employees' Union
4. Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment
5. Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology
6. Canadian Association of Pathologists Environment National Specialty Network
7. Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment
8. Canadian Federation of Medical Students' Health and Environment Adaptive Response Task Force
9. Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions
10. Canadian Health Association for Sustainability and Equity
11. Children's Environmental Health Clinic
12. Children's Healthcare Canada
13. College of Family Physicians of Canada
14. Dewdney Medical Group
15. Doctors and Nurses for Planetary Health - Kootenay-Boundary
16. Doctors for Planetary Health - West Coast
17. Doctors of B.C.
18. Faculty of Medicine, Laval University
19. International Federation of Medical Students' Association - Québec
20. MD Moms for Healthy Recovery
21. Naturopathic Doctors for Environmental and Social Trust
22. Nurses And Doctors for Planetary Health, Victoria BC
23. Ontario Council of Hospital Unions-CUPE
24. Ontario Nurses' Association
25. Ontario Public Health Association
26. Pediatric Chairs of Canada
27. Public Health Association of BC
28. Quebec College of Family Physicians
29. Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
30. Réseau d'action pour la santé durable du Québec
31. Ridge Meadows Section of General Practice
32. Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
33. Synergie Santé Environnement
34. XR santé Québec