



Fossil Fuel Divestment

What is the fossil fuel divestment movement?

Divestment is the act of selling all of one's shares of a given company or type of asset for an explicit political or social reasons – effective if done publicly, intentionally, and in coalition with others in a vocal movement.

The **fossil fuel divestment movement** includes **300+** student campaigns at colleges and universities across the United States and internationally (as of summer 2013). Students are demanding that administrators no longer invest their endowments into companies that extract and profit off of fossil fuel resources like coal, oil, or natural gas.

For many campaigns, divestment from fossil fuels is only one pressure tactic in the broader struggle for **environmental justice (EJ)**. The most effective EJ-focused campaigns make demands for real improvements in the lives of people being impacted by fossil fuel extraction and climate change – working in solidarity with **frontline communities** – along the way to divestment.

A Brief History of the Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement

- Students from Swarthmore College (in Pennsylvania) visited **Appalachia** in 2010.
- Folks in Appalachia were demanding an end to mountain-top removal coal mining, and other destructive fossil-fuel extraction.
 - Mountain-top coal removal has destroyed more than 500 Appalachian mountains.
 - People living near the destruction are 50% more likely to die of cancer and over 40% more likely to be born with birth defects, compared with other people in Appalachia.
- Students wanted to **stand in solidarity** with the folks in Appalachia in a way that made sense. They traced financial ties and found out that Swarthmore invests in the destructive companies.



Members of SMJ in Appalachia.

- They wanted to use their power as students to win a campaign with clear demands, so they demanded that Swarthmore divest from fossil fuels. In their research, they learned about the movement to divest from companies supporting apartheid in South Africa in the 80s.
- The group of students called themselves **Swarthmore Mountain Justice**.
- In 2011, SMJ reached out to **Responsible Endowments Coalition** and together they began to grow the campaign to others like UNC Chapel Hill, Lewis and Clark, and Brown University.
- Since 2011, other organizations like Energy Action Coalition, California Student Sustainability Coalition, and Sierra Student Coalition have gotten involved.
- In the fall of 2012, **350** endorsed the divestment movement and it grew rapidly to the more than 300+ campus campaigns that exist today.

Why divest from the fossil fuel industry?

2°C

A “safe” level of warming for the planet.

575 GT

The amount of CO₂ we can burn and stay under 2°C.

2795 GT

The CO₂ that will be emitted if fossil fuel companies burn their reserves.

A fossil fuel company’s business model is to inherently and inevitably profit from destruction. Here are three ways how that plays out:

- 1) **Destruction of the Planet:** Extracting and using fossil fuels damages the environment as an immediate effect (e.g., cutting down trees to drill for oil) and as a long-term effect (e.g., carbon emissions causing global warming and sea level rise).
 - 2) **Destruction of Communities:** Extracting and using fossil fuels directly harms people. Those who live near or work on extraction sites, fossil fuel power plants, or hazard sites have extremely high rates of diseases from asthma to cancer. The way environmental hazards disproportionately affect communities of color is called **environmental racism**. Environmental justice is a response to environmental racism.
 - 3) **Destruction of Democracy:** The fossil fuel industry has a uniquely strong hold on US politics. Companies have funded deceptive climate-denial research and marketing to discount concerns about their activities, and they use record profits to influence politicians and obstruct climate change policy.
- * Overall, students who work on fossil fuel divestment campaigns believe that fossil fuel companies cannot be sufficiently improved by ‘traditional’ means of engagement.

As each school has a unique situation – investment portfolio, financial and administrative structure, culture around sustainability or working with students – there is a lot of variety in the 300+ campaigns!

Some campaigns ask for divestment from a specific list of companies, some ask for divestment from a specific type of fossil fuel (the SMJ campaign names the ‘Sordid Sixteen’ worst fossil fuel companies), and **many ask to divest from the top 200 publicly traded fossil fuel companies**. Some ask for divestment from all fossil fuel companies, period.

Demanding Environmental Justice?

At this point in the movement, most fossil fuel divestment campaigns organize towards the long-term demand of divestment. Interim demands tend to be strategic for divestment, e.g, demanding that students are able to meet with the Board of Trustees.

However, in order to make this movement a force that propels real change rather than stopping at a symbolic cultural shift, there is also a need for fossil fuel divestment campaigns to demand that companies make changes *now*.

Some ideas:

- Determine one particular case of a fossil fuel company harming a community; preferably, one local to your school.
- Ask organized community members what demands they have on the company.
- Orient your campaign around demanding that your school administration uses its power to make that demand. Can your CFO write a letter or make a call to the company? Can an administrator set up a meeting between company officials, community members, students, and administrators?

This may seem tricky—does it mean that, if a company delivers the demand, you have to drop divestment? No, definitely not. It means you’ve made a change in real peoples’ lives and you can move onto more impactful demands while still organizing for divestment.

Continuing to demand divestment reflects that fossil fuel companies are completely unlikely to change their entire business plans in a way that would accommodate social and environmental justice (essentially, by stopping fossil fuel extraction).