AGU Should Sever Its Ties with ExxonMobil

or decades, ExxonMobil has engaged in a campaign of disinformation: funding individuals and organizations committed to portraying climate change as highly uncertain, if not a hoax; questioning the motives of climate scientists; and targeting researchers for personal attacks aimed at discrediting their findings.

ExxonMobil executives have repeatedly suggested in speeches, in interviews, and in "advertorials" that climate science was too unreliable to be trusted as a basis for policy making. Flying in the face of peer-reviewed economic studies, they have also insisted that the costs of mitigating climate change would be greater than the benefits.

Given these facts, it baffles us that AGU continues to accept money from ExxonMobil. The more than half a million dollars of ExxonMobil money that AGU has accepted over the past 15 years violates AGU's own policy on accepting funding from groups that peddle misinformation.

This fall, AGU reaffirmed its perplexing stance. On 23 September, its Board of Directors chose not to sever ties to ExxonMobil funding, despite receiving a detailed report from AGU members that demonstrates that ExxonMobil is still in the business of disinformation (see http://bit.ly/disinforeport).

We urge AGU's Board of Directors to reverse its decision. Not only is AGU's integrity as a scientific society at stake, but so too is the integrity of the scientific process.

ExxonMobil's Campaign of Disinformation

ExxonMobil's systematic attacks on climate science are well documented. They have been detailed by our fellow scientists, as well as by us—indeed, we ourselves have been targets of ExxonMobil's repeated attacks. ExxonMobil's assault on climate science has been documented in the scholarly research of historians and sociologists who have taken up the issue of attacks on science as a question of academic scholarship. The attacks have also been heavily explored by journalists, science advocacy organizations, and filmmakers.

What's more, ExxonMobil's attacks on climate science are not a thing of the past. The

report by AGU members sent to AGU's Board on 25 March 2016, ahead of their 6-7 April Board meeting, documented an exhaustive body of evidence supporting the fact that ExxonMobil "continues to generate its own misinformative comments, fund groups that promote climate science misinformation, and financially support more than 100 climatedenying members of Congress."

Moreover, "despite stating publicly in 2008 that it would no longer support climate science misinformation, ExxonMobil has continued to make public statements disparaging the validity of climate science and to financially support others who do the same."

Exxon to appropriate AGU's institutional social license to help legitimize the company's climate misinformation, AGU is undermining its stated values as well as the work of its own members."

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urgency of climate action. But by allowing

The letter called on President Margaret Leinen "to protect the integrity of climate science by rejecting the sponsorship of future AGU conferences by corporations complicit in climate misinformation, starting with ExxonMobil."

Given the conflict between our society's policies and ExxonMobil's documented activities, we believed that AGU would take steps to disassociate itself from that company.

ExxonMobil's attacks on climate science are not a thing of the past.

AGU's Unchanged Position

After deliberating on the matter for several months, in April President Leinen and the AGU Board of Directors decided otherwise. Their justification rested on a legalistic

interpretation: "It is not possible for us to determine unequivocally whether

ExxonMobil is participating in misinformation about science currently, either directly or indirectly, and...AGU's acceptance of sponsorship of the 2015 Student Breakfast does not

constitute a threat to AGU's reputation."

In response, two congressmen—Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) and Rep. Ted Lieu (D-Calif.)—wrote a letter to President Leinen. ExxonMobil was still funding "several organizations that cast doubt on climate change," they explained, offering recent examples that connect the corporation to organizations that peddle climate change misinformation (see http://bit.ly/Lieu-letter). They urged AGU to make decisions independent of "self-serving representations by ExxonMobil."

This letter prompted the Board to meet to reconsider its decision. Sadly, on 23 September, the Board announced that its position was unchanged.

Strange Bedfellows

The fact that AGU accepts this money is a clear violation of AGU's Organizational Support Policy. The policy states, "AGU will not accept funding from organizational partners that promote and/or disseminate misinformation of science, or that fund organizations that publicly promote misinformation of science."

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It is precisely because ExxonMobil so clearly fails to meet the standard of this policy that more than 100 leading AGU members, including the three of us, were signatories to an open letter last February urging AGU to sever its ties with the company (see http://bit.ly/open -letter-2AGU).

The letter noted that "AGU has established a long history of scientific excellence with its peer-reviewed publications and conferences, as well as a strong position statement on the

AGU's Double Standard on Scientific Integrity

As one of us told *Inside Climate News* after the Board's first decision in April (see http://bit .ly/McKenna-Hirji), AGU's actions make "a

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mockery of its own [policy] that states that it will not accept funding from disseminators of disinformation. If the AGU cannot turn down a mere \$35K [per year] from a high-profile disinformer like Exxon, then it is hard to imagine it ever adhering to its [policy]."

But this is not just about a breakfast. It is about AGU lending its imprimatur to an organization with a history of attacking AGU's own members. It's about the "social license," to quote the February open letter, that AGU provides for ExxonMobil to continue with such attacks

It's also about scientific integrity.

For more than 2 decades, ExxonMobil and its allies have consistently downplayed, disparaged, and in some cases rejected outright the evidence that scientists have painstakingly gathered. Such actions are the antithesis of the spirit of the scientific endeavor.

As scientists, we are committed to drawing conclusions based on evidence. That is why AGU's recent decision is so shocking. By rejecting the evidence of ExxonMobil's antiscientific activities, AGU not only validates ExxonMobil's disregard for facts but also showcases its own willingness to abandon them.

The message is clear: AGU does not require its funders or itself to be held to the same standards of evidence-based scrutiny that it expects of the scientists who publish in its own journals.

Beware Third-Party Allies

The AGU Board's position seems to rest on the word "currently." Of course, we cannot prove what anyone is doing at any instant, particularly if they are doing it behind closed doors.

One of the key findings of scholarly research is that organizations that disparage scientific findings typically do so through such "third-party allies" as think tanks and trade organizations so as to hide their unsavory activities from view. ExxonMobil has done this in the past, and we have substantial evidence that it continues to do so.

Among other things, it is a member of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which has promoted state legislation—modeled on creationism—requiring school teachers to teach "both sides" of the climate change "debate." ALEC's website and speakers at its meetings suggest that the causes of recent observed warming are still not really understood and/or are "inevitable."

For this reason, many prominent corporations have severed ties with ALEC, including Google, Microsoft, Ford, Walmart, Unilever, Amazon, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi. As then chair of Google Eric Schmidt told the Los Angeles

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Times (see http://bit.ly/HalperALEC), "We should not be aligned with such people—they're just, they're just literally lying."

AGU Should Reject Funds from ExxonMobil

There is precedent for declining funding from an industry that has engaged in antiscientific activities. For decades, tobacco giants, including Phillip Morris and R.J. Reynolds, were generous funders of scientific and biomedical research, as well as the arts, museums, and even women's tennis. No doubt the recipients

of those funds were appreciative of them.

But when it became clear that these companies had worked to undermine the scientific evidence of the harm caused by their products, universities, medical schools, and schools of public health began to realize that they faced a dilemma. Yes, those funds were put to good use, but they were also used to buy credibility by an industry whose statements were not credible.

And so today, leading institutions, including the Harvard Medical School and Chan School of Public Health, the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, the University of Texas, and many others, no longer accept tobacco money. At the Uni-

versity of California, San Francisco (a leader in tobacco control research), by the time the faculty voted formally in 2003 to institute a notobacco funding policy, the faculty had already come to that position de facto.

Some of our colleagues may feel that it is "political" to turn down such funds. But if declining funding indicates disapproval, then surely accepting it can be equally well interpreted as indicating approval.

We should not succumb to status quo bias. As a dean at the University of Texas told the *New York Times* (see http://bit.ly/tobacco -money) when explaining its decision to decline tobacco funding, "Just because it's green, we don't have to take it."

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