



Center for Business
and Human Rights

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Ben Soraci
President, ExxonMobil Foundation
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Dear Ben,

I am writing to respectfully resign my participation in ExxonMobil's External Citizenship Advisory Panel (ECAP). I joined the panel in 2014 because I believed that the company was committed to good corporate citizenship and respect for civil society organizations like my own. Over the last three years, I have appreciated the opportunity to meet with senior representatives of the company to discuss human rights issues, often in a deep and thoughtful way. But in the past year, I've seen these factors decline.

As you and I have discussed at some length, I am particularly concerned about the company's targeted attack on respected civil society organizations through the courts. Just last week, Exxon filed another brief in Federal District Court in Texas advancing an argument that everyday aspects of civil society advocacy with public officials should be treated as an illegal conspiracy. The brief argues that having a private meeting, conducting a workshop, publishing a report, or advocating that a public official take action are all elements of what you deem an illegal "conspiracy."

This argument undermines the democratic principles of our society and the vital role that civil society plays in it. In my own work in the NGO and academic sectors, I often have engaged in planning and strategy meetings, published reports, held private conversations and emails, and advocated with public officials. When I worked at the State Department, I regularly consulted with NGOs and advocates seeking to influence the direction of U.S. foreign policy. I also vigorously defended the right of organizations and individuals to conduct this kind of work in countries where governments sought to suppress their rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly.

Many companies face criticism and critique, but few respond with the kind of vehemence and aggressive attack strategy that Exxon has executed over the last year. As we discussed in Dallas in December, this approach is especially disappointing because there are much more effective and constructive ways to respond to such criticism.

In my work at NYU Stern School of Business, I study companies that face significant human rights challenges. In the face of public criticism, companies that demonstrate good corporate citizenship are those that take seriously allegations of wrongdoing, assess their validity, and then adopt recommendations to correct missteps. They are transparent about their own record and welcome discussion with interested publics.

This is the approach I have encouraged Exxon to take. I am disappointed that instead of examining its own record and seeking to restore a respected place for itself in the public debate, Exxon has chosen to turn up the temperature on civil society groups.

I know you and your colleagues to be people of integrity who take science seriously. The debate about how to address the urgent threat of climate change needs Exxon as a credible participant. It would be against the long-term interests of the company and its shareholders if it were to win the legal argument at the expense of its reputation and the public's trust. I know that Exxon views itself as a vital player in scientific and policy debates about climate change. Others should view you that way, as well, so that we all can get on with the business of developing sound solutions to a warming planet.

I have appreciated the opportunity to raise these and other important human rights issues in a serious and respectful manner over the past three years. As you know, my preference has been to remain on the ECAP to continue raising these important issues. But last week's legal filing is a clear demonstration that the company is choosing to double down on a strategy that I feel strongly is counter-productive to your own interests and to the democratic values of our society. I am open to discussing these issues with you from outside the ECAP and will continue to encourage you to seek alternative approaches to engage your critics. I hope that you can quickly find a better way forward that puts addressing climate change at the forefront of your agenda.

Sincerely,

Sarah Labowitz
Co-director, Center for Business and Human Rights
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