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ENERGY 11/06/2015 @ 11:07AM 1,390 views

Why Oil Is Not Like Tobacco

The recent disclosure that the NY Attorney General has begun an investigation of Exxon Mobil over whether it misled investors and the public about the risks of climate change, like the growing calls to divest investments in conventional energy stocks, has some observers likening oil to tobacco: a product which poses risks that demand immediate and resolute attention. The problem is that while this is an appealing analogy—a world addicted to oil—the parallel ends there. Unlike tobacco, oil is a product that must be completely replaced before its use can be fully curtailed. There is no nicotine patch to wean off the oil addiction.

A central challenge in the American public discourse about energy and climate change is the desire to reduce the issue to a binary intellectual model: “belief” in man-made climate change, and therefore against carbon fuels, or disbelief, so “drill baby drill.” It just isn’t so simple. The assistant attorneys general investigating Exxon Mobil will drive to their oil heated homes in gas fueled automobiles, and the undergraduates calling for energy company divestiture will charge their iPhones with natural gas fueled power and sit in classrooms possibly heated with coal burning furnaces.

Despite the popularity of the paleo diet, it is highly unlikely that human civilization will willingly return to a pre-industrial lifestyle to save the planet, so before the world can wean off oil, gas, or even coal, there remains a scientific and engineering challenge: to power, heat, cool and fuel our modern lives with less carbon emission. Charging Exxon Mobil with fraud or trying to limit capital market access by energy companies may bring some attention to the problem, but it will not solve it.

