Science & Technology

What Exxon Knew

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An investigation launched by recent Columbia Journalism School graduates has found that for decades Exxon used climate-change research to shape its long-term business plans despite publicly insisting that the research was too flawed to justify limiting fossil-fuel emissions.

The students' special investigative series, published in October by the *Los Angeles Times*, revealed that beginning in the mid-1980s, Exxon conducted internal studies to determine how it might benefit from the melting of ice in the Arctic, where 13 percent of the world's untapped oil resides, and how it might better protect its drilling rigs, pipelines, and processing plants from rising seas, floods, and extreme weather. Exxon executives at the time privately acknowledged that the science behind global warming was irrefutable, the *Times* articles show, and yet the company went on to spend tens of millions of dollars between 1998 and 2005 on public-relations campaigns that questioned the science.

The *Times* articles, which were based on archival research and interviews with former Exxon employees, were cowritten by Elah Feder '15JRN; Dino Grandoni '11CC, '15JRN; Melissa Hirsch '14JRN; Katie Jennings '14JRN; Sara Jerving '14JRN; Amy Lieberman '14JRN, '14SIPA; Michael Phillis '13JRN; and Susanne Rust, an adjunct professor of journalism. The work was done as part of the journalism school's Energy and Environment Fellowship Project, which provides reporting opportunities for alumni. Five days after the first article appeared, California congressmen Ted Lieu and Mark DeSaulnier formally requested a federal investigation of Exxon under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, which is the same law that was used to prosecute tobacco companies in the 1990s.

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