

Compelled by the following reasons, we, the undersigned faculty and staff of Washington University in St. Louis urge the university to divest its endowment from the top 200 fossil fuel companies in support of student demands.

### **Climate Change**

The scientific community has declared anthropogenic climate change a crisis we cannot afford to ignore. Climate change will not only devastatingly impact humans, but also wildlife and natural ecosystems--those on which we depend for food, water, and clean air. Scientific consensus confirms that avoiding a catastrophic global temperature rise requires leaving at least 80% of known fossil fuels – coal, oil, and gas – underground.<sup>1</sup> The Paris Accords and President Obama’s Clean Power plan modestly reduce emissions, but neither comes close to meeting this standard. Moreover, the current federal administration threatens progress made by curtailing environmental regulations almost daily, necessitating a serious and urgent response.

### **Scientific Integrity**

As a research university, our duty is to pursue truth, promote public understanding, and stand with science. Fossil fuel corporations – including executives who until recently were represented on our Board of Trustees – have been complicit in attacks on science. Recent federal investigations expose how corporations such as ExxonMobil have long worked to actively undermine climate science and public knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Divestment presents opportunity to reiterate scientific values, reject misinformation, and embody our core motto, *Per Veritatem Vis*, “strength through truth.”

### **Public Health**

Hundreds of past and present scientific studies, some produced by Washington University, demonstrate the powerful links between fossil-fuel-related air pollution and millions of premature deaths worldwide. Fossil fuel extraction, production, and consumption all directly impact cardiovascular conditions and respiratory diseases like asthma. Events like People and Climate Change: Vulnerability, Adaptation, Social Justice this November, introduced by Chancellor Wrighton, catalyzed important conversations about these issues. Moving forward, we have the potential to align university principles with actions. As a world leader in research, medical practice, and public health at large, Washington University has a duty to promote public health and respond to the ill-effects of fossil fuels on communities.<sup>3</sup>

### **Human Rights**

Globally, fossil fuel companies have been implicated in multiple criminal scandals via human rights violations, instigation of violent conflicts, and governmental corruption. Expanding fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure threaten rights to individual property, clean air and water, and the integrity of marginalized communities. A visible case: the Dakota Access Pipeline, which exposes

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<sup>1</sup> International Energy Agency, “[World Energy Outlook 2016](#).”

<sup>2</sup> Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik Conway. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury; and, Hall, Shannon. 2015. “[Exxon Knew about Climate Change almost 40 Years Ago](#).” *Scientific American*, October 26, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Haines, Andy, et al. 2009. “[Public Health Benefits of Strategies to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Overview and Implications for Policy-Makers](#).” *The Lancet* 374(9707):2104-2114.

both environmental racism and refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty and treaty rights. As stated by Pope Francis<sup>4</sup>, energy is a global climate change issue, and global climate change is a human rights issue. Fossil fuel consumption by wealthy countries most mars disenfranchised citizens of the world's poorest countries. For an institution that seeks to position itself internationally as respecting the human rights of all global citizens, divestment from fossil fuels is a necessity.

### **Endowments and Stewardship**

We recognize the importance of the endowment for the financial health of the university, and the role that wise stewardship plays. It is with this perspective that we observe that Washington University lost 9.6% in 2016, when the average decline in university endowments was only 1.9%.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, the University of California rose 4.3% and Stanford .8%. Both have larger endowments than our own and have divested from coal and tar sands, some of the dirtiest fossil fuels. Though our university administration previously cited financial concerns as justification against divestment, clearly divesting from fossil fuels in a well diversified and wisely managed portfolio does not seriously endanger positive returns on our endowment.

### **Leadership**

Washington University has the opportunity to accompany peer institutions by truly committing to scientific consensus and divesting from fossil fuels, while moving toward 100% renewable energy. In recent years our university's reputation has been significantly damaged from public reporting on our lack of socio-economic and racial diversity as well as multiple administrative scandals. It is not in our interest to ignore the unreliability of a fossil fuel industry witnessing major bankruptcies. Instead, we can join the hundreds of institutions internationally moving to divest.

Included in the over 220 institutions worldwide fully divested from coal, oil, and gas are influential entities such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the World Council of Churches, and the British Medical Association. Other universities, including Syracuse and the University of Massachusetts, have taken steps to divest from all fossil fuel companies. Still more,<sup>6</sup> such as Georgetown, Yale, and Boston University, have committed to partial divestment. While these complex processes take time and planning, Washington University should begin now to move away from fossil fuels and towards energy sources with long-term growth potential like wind and solar.

### **Our Legacy and our Shared Future**

As faculty, we have the privilege to educate, inspire, and support our students. This is a generation that has no doubt about the realities of climate change. This is a generation that will also bear the brunt of the decisions of today's leaders. In attempting to lead Washington University, Student Union called for divestment in 2014. There have been over a thousand student signatures on petitions calling for the same. University leaders and faculty can recognize and support our

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<sup>4</sup> Bergoglio, Jorge Mario (Pope Francis). 2015. "Encyclical Letter 'Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home."

<sup>5</sup> WUSTL's stated loss for FY 2016 is listed as -5.2% in "[Endowments take a hit.](#)" *Inside Higher Ed*, Jan. 31, 2017.

WUSTL's own records suggest a steeper loss, at around -9.6%. See:

<https://wustl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/FY-2016-Washington-University-Financial-Statements-Signed.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/01/syracuse-university-to-divest-800m-endowment-from-fossil-fuels> and <https://gofossilfree.org/commitments/>

students, our personal interests, and our academic integrity; we can demonstrate that the university's legacy is our legacy. We ask that Washington University help lead the way into a more ethical and sustainable future for all future generations of students.

We, the faculty of Washington University in St. Louis, stand with the students and call for the university to divest from fossil fuels.