

# As our forests burn, oil companies are doubling down on their old business models

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The McDougall Creek wildfire burns on the mountainside above a lakefront home, in West Kelowna, B.C., on Aug. 18.

DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

*John Vaillant's latest book is [Fire Weather: The Making of a Beast](#).*

Wildfire is not just a public health and safety issue – it is fast becoming a national security threat that is overwhelming emergency response, destabilizing provinces, and affecting their GDPs. Here, in Canada's own "Black Summer," we are battling a new kind of domestic terror. Like gun violence in the United States, its causes and sources are well understood, and its damage – so frightening and disruptive in the moment – lingers on for years in ways that can break lives and bank accounts.

This year's bill will be in the billions (again). As abundant evidence has made clear, 21st century fire burns aren't the same as those in the past, and insurance companies know this. The situation is now so existentially, quantitatively dangerous that State Farm and Allstate are [refusing fire coverage](#) for new homes and businesses across entire swaths of the continent. Other insurers are watching, and the implications for Canada are grave indeed.

How is it then that the fossil fuel industry – the planet's biggest contributor of carbon emissions – along with the banks that finance it, and the governments that subsidize it, gets a pass, not just from responsibility, but even from accountability to the laws of chemistry and physics?

Before going further, let's draw a sharp distinction between workers doing their level best to remain solvent and employed, and "owners" (as they're known in Fort McMurray, Alta.) – the companies that have lately been saying the quiet parts out loud.

Wait – what have they been saying?

Here's Exxon CEO [Darren Woods](#): "At the end of the day, we're a molecule company, not an electron company." In other words, Exxon intends to develop, sell, and burn petroleum products for the foreseeable future while making no effort to transition to renewables.

Shell's new CEO, Wael Sawan, had the chutzpah to [tell the BBC](#) that cutting oil production would be "dangerous and irresponsible."

Has Mr. Sawan looked at a thermometer lately? Has he seen the fires burning in B.C., Alberta, and now, Louisiana, where so many petroleum workers (are trying to) live?

Meanwhile, Canada's own Suncor, whose stated mission is "to provide trusted energy that enhances people's lives while caring for each other and the Earth," has sold off its forward-looking renewables business, and hired former Exxon VP Rich Kruger as its new CEO. We know where Exxon's priorities lie, and so does Mr. Kruger, who has [paid no lip service](#) to renewables, decarbonizing, or anything else biologically life-affirming. "We are in the business to make money, and as much of it as possible," he said, "and everybody, starting with me, needs to see how they do that."

If I was an employee, I'd be nervous. (If you haven't seen Mike Judge's Office Space, watch it now.)

While Mr. Kruger conceded that lowering emissions is important, he emphasized that [it's not profitable](#) (enough) and, therefore, not his main concern. Shareholders come first, second and third.

Here's where the laws of nature – to which Mr. Kruger, Suncor, and every shareholder must answer – beg to differ: if you're in the fossil fuel business, you're in the fire business, which means you're in the CO2 business, which means you're part of the problem, aiding and abetting global climate disruption that is, right now, endangering millions of lives.

So, who decided that corporations were exempt from earthly consequences? And why do governments and voters tolerate it? The problem lies with the artificial, but sacred obligation to shareholders, which Mr. Woods, Mr. Sawan, and Mr. Kruger have been charged with honouring at all and any costs. In this way, the profit motive, which has metastasized, cancer-like, into the pursuit of endless growth on the body of our finite planet, has attained the sanctity of an orthodox religion, defying logic, science, common sense, and common decency.

Looked at objectively, this accountability gap enables what amounts to state-sanctioned sociopathy. As Mr. Kruger [said himself](#), "I play to win."

Consequences be damned.

And, boy, are there consequences: look at any metric of climate distress – air temperature, sea temperature, coral bleaching, glacier loss, polar ice loss, drought, wildfire intensity – all of them are spiking. Many of us will miss work if our body temperature goes one degree above normal; three degrees, and we might land in the hospital. Our planet, the source of all life, love, joy, and wealth, has a fever. Everyone can feel it. Most of us, including CEOs, bankers, prime ministers, and presidents, know what's causing it. Collectively, we have the tools to reduce it. We have the tools to win.

Do it for the shareholders. They need fire insurance, too.

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