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New Documents Reveal Denial Playbook Originated with Big Oil, Not Big Tobacco
Industry documents show common playbook is decades older than previously recognized

Washington, DC – New research by the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) not only confirms that the tobacco and fossil fuel industries used a shared playbook, but also suggests that playbook *originated not with tobacco—as long assumed—but with the oil industry itself.*

As evidence mounts of the oil industry’s decades-long campaign of climate deception and denial, its allies have dismissed any parallels to the tobacco industry’s campaign of cancer denial.ⁱ More than 100 industry documents drawn from the Tobacco Industry Archivesⁱⁱ demonstrate not only the legitimacy of the comparison between big oil and tobacco, but also reveal direct connections between these industries that go back far earlier than previously thought.

“From the 1950s onward, the oil and tobacco firms were using not only the same PR firms and the same research institutes, but many of the same researchers,” said CIEL President Carroll Muffett. “Again and again we found both the PR firms and the researchers worked first for oil, then for tobacco. It was a pedigree the tobacco companies recognized, and sought out.”

In one notable example, Stanford Research Institute – which proved instrumental in oil industry attacks on smog science in the 1950s and warned industry execs of climate risks in the 1960s – was funded under secret tobacco industry accounts to build a machine to test for workplace carbon monoxide. Similarly, mathematician Theodor Sterling, recognized by both tobacco executives and investigators as one of the industry’s most important assets in the fight against cancer science, worked on behalf of oil company interests both *before and after* joining the tobacco fight.

“Big Oil created the organized apparatus of doubt,” Muffett said. “It used the same playbook of misinformation, obfuscation, and research laundered through front groups to attack science and sow uncertainty on lead, on smog, and in the early debates on climate change. Big Tobacco used and refined that playbook for decades in its fight to keep us smoking – just as Big Oil is using it now, again, to keep us burning fossil fuels.”

Today’s release scratches the surface of a vast trove of more 14 million formerly confidential documents in the Tobacco Industry Archives, many of which remain under seal. “These documents represent, at most, half of the story – the tobacco half,” notes Muffett. “The rest of this story—including vital truths about the history of climate deception – remains hidden in the oil industry’s files. Six decades of denial and deception is six too many. We owe it to ourselves, and to future generations, to bring that truth to light.”

Below are some highlights from the findings:

- In the late 1970s, Sir Richard Dobson served simultaneously as Chair of British American Tobacco and on the board of Exxon. Dobson is notorious for once suggesting that cigarette smoking in moderation is beneficial, asserting “the tobacco industry, in total, does more good than harm.” During the late 1970s, BAT alone shared Board members with at least three different oil companies.
- Oil companies were testing cigarette smoke for toxins as early as the 1950s, including in partnership with research funded by the tobacco industry.
- Exxon and Shell patented and actively promoted their own cigarette filters repeatedly from the 1960s through the 1990s, and entered into joint research agreements with tobacco firms to bring them to market.
- Stanford Research Institute, which was instrumental in the oil industry’s Smoke and Fumes efforts, carried out similar efforts for tobacco spanning more than a decade, including psychographic analysis; testing filters for carbon monoxide absorption; and designing portable testing equipment to discretely analyze cigarette smoke.
- A former Standard Oil executive recommended numerous oil-connected scientists for the Tobacco industry’s Scientific Advisory Board, many of whom went on to work for tobacco.
- Theodor Sterling, recognized by both tobacco companies and Justice Department prosecutors as one of tobacco’s most important scientific assets for two decades, did similar work for oil companies both before and during his work with tobacco.
- Tobacco companies closely monitored research and developments on smog, lead, and other petroleum-linked air pollutants.

ⁱ Editor’s Note: For a detailed discussion of the extensive overlaps between the tobacco conspiracy and the climate denial campaigns of the fossil fuel industries from the late 1970s forward, see *Merchants of Doubt*, by Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway.

ⁱⁱ The Tobacco Industry Archive is an online archive of nearly 15 million tobacco industry documents produced during the course of tobacco industry litigation. The archive is maintained by the University of California at San Francisco.