

The Sue Big Oil Messaging Triangle: A Communications Guide

You are excited to talk with others about the Sue Big Oil campaign. That’s fantastic. The more people who hear about and join the Sue Big Oil campaign, the more successful it will be.

This Guide describes a messaging framework that you can use to explain how suing fossil fuel companies will help protect our communities and contribute to solving the climate crisis.

The Sue Big Oil messaging “triangle” is built on three core pillars.¹ Using these three pillars in combination can help you speak confidently and effectively about the campaign. Below, you can see how the three pillars are used in the Sue Big Oil Declaration.



The Message Pillar	The Sue Big Oil Declaration
Our Communities are paying the costs of climate change	“For decades, oil and gas corporations have known that burning fossil fuels would cause the heat waves, wildfires and flooding that we’re now experiencing in BC.” “We pay the skyrocketing costs of climate damages.”
Big oil is profiting from causing climate change	“It’s not right that CEOs and investors continue to pocket the profits.” “These multinational companies spent millions to deceive, deny and distract us on their way to billions in profit by preventing action on climate change.”
We must make polluters pay their fair share – through a class action lawsuit.	“We must force oil and gas corporations to change their business practices and pay their fair share for the harm they’re causing.” “Let’s sue Big Oil.”

Your messaging will be strongest if you use all three pillars when talking about the Sue Big Oil campaign, especially if you provide some local examples of the extreme weather and climate costs that BC, or your community specifically, has faced (or is expected in the future). You don’t need to quote the Sue Big Oil Declaration – instead use your own words.

¹ We would like to acknowledge that our messaging triangle draws on the excellent research done by Breakthrough Strategies and Solutions and the Sightline Institute in the U.S., who proposed a similar messaging triangle (although not focused on lawsuits) in their report, *Climate Solutions for a Stronger America: A Guide for Engaging and Winning on Climate Change and Clean Energy* (2nd Ed., 2014), available at https://media.wix.com/ugd/ef28c1_fb488dd8246a4996845734531f2eadcd.pdf.

Here are some additional points that you may draw upon to back up the three pillars.

Our communities are paying the costs of climate change

Key message:

Climate change is imposing heavy costs on communities across BC.

Key supporting facts:

- More than 600 people died in BC in the 2021 heat dome. Scientists calculate that the heat dome was 150 times more likely to occur due to climate change.²
- Wildfires are becoming bigger due to climate change. As a result of recent wildfires, thousands of people had to be evacuated from their homes, millions breathed smoke-filled air, and the town of Lytton burned to the ground. Scientists at the University of Victoria estimate that the 2017 wildfires were 7-11 times larger due to climate change.³
- The Province of BC estimates that Lower Mainland municipalities should be spending \$9.5 billion in the coming decades to protect themselves from sea level rise due to climate change.⁴
- The Insurance Bureau of Canada estimates that Canadian local governments should be spending \$5.3 billion each year to keep us safe from climate change,⁵ but local governments have nowhere near that kind of money.

Tips and Strategies:

- Talk about the local climate impacts and costs facing your own community. Have you experienced impacts from flooding, wildfires, extreme heat or drought? Tell your story. Talk about climate impacts as real and urgent.
- Ask your local government what it is doing to protect you and what it will cost.
- Point out that our communities can and should be spending money now to prepare ourselves for future climate impacts (climate adaptation), and these impacts will keep getting worse as long as we keep burning fossil fuels.

Why this key message works:

Climate change has too often been portrayed as a far-off problem that will affect someone else. Talking about local impacts grounds the climate crisis in our personal experiences and emphasizes that it is urgent and already happening. Tying those costs to the legal responsibility of the fossil fuel industry gives us a path to addressing the crisis.

² <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/western-north-american-extreme-heat-virtually-impossible-without-human-caused-climate-change/>.

³ M. C. Kirchmeier-Young et al. Attribution of the Influence of Human-Induced Climate Change on an Extreme Fire Season. *Earth's Future*, 13 December 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2018EF001050>.

⁴ Delcan (2012). *Cost of Adaptation -Sea Dykes & Alternative Strategies: Final Report*. British Columbia Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations. Natural Resources Canada.

⁵ <https://fcm.ca/en/news-media/news-release/climate-adaptation-estimated-cost-municipalities-5-billion-annually>.

⁶ You may want to do some research about local climate impacts. The Pacific Climate Impacts Consortium (PCIC) has excellent resources about the expected shifts each BC region and community can expect from climate change. These include [regional summaries](#) and the [Plan2Adapt](#) web tool.

Big Oil is profiting from causing climate change

Key message:

Fossil fuel companies have known for decades that their products would cause climate change and the types of climate impacts we're seeing in BC. They chose to lobby against climate action and spread misinformation about climate science so that they could continue to make massive profits.

Key supporting facts:

- Just 90 entities, mostly fossil fuel companies, are collectively responsible for almost 2/3 of historic human-caused greenhouse gas emissions from their products and direct emissions. The largest (Chevron, Exxon, Saudi Aramco) are responsible for over 3% each.⁷
- When a company learns that its products are destroying property and killing people, it has an obligation to either solve the problem or offer new products instead; Big Oil instead worked to suppress renewable energy, spread information and lobby against climate action.
- Scientists working for the fossil fuel industry knew about the risks of climate change in the 1960s, and the types of impacts it would cause by the 1970s and 80s (even incorporating climate modelling into oil rig design). These scientists advised industry that fossil fuel production would need to decline.
- Fossil fuel companies engaged in and funded massive campaigns to mislead the public on climate science. One industry coalition's communications plan promised that "victory would be achieved" when "average citizens 'understand' (recognize) uncertainties in climate science," and that those promoting climate action on the basis of science appear to be "out of touch with reality."⁸

Tips and strategies:

- Become familiar with the role of the fossil fuel industry in delaying action on climate change. Start with [Smoke and Fumes](#) by the Center for International Environmental Law.
- If your local government sent a [climate accountability letter](#) to fossil fuel companies, find out whether the companies replied and what they said.
- Both the fossil fuel industry and individuals have a role to play in solving the climate crisis, but right now individuals pay 100% of climate costs, and Big Oil is off the hook.

Why this key message works:

Messages that suggesting that individuals have to upend their lives, when they don't have power to make change, are disempowering. By focusing on the huge role of the fossil fuel industry in causing the problem, together with a plan to change its behaviour, people can see something that can be done to solve the climate crisis.

You can give focus to your demands for climate action by emphasizing that the companies that have contributed most to climate change need to pay their fair share.

⁷ <https://climateaccountability.org/carbonmajors.html>.

⁸ <https://climateinvestigations.org/climate-deniers/cooler-heads-coalition/>.

We must make polluters pay their fair share through a class action lawsuit

Key message:

When local governments band together to sue the global fossil fuel industry for its fair share of our local climate costs, we can get back some of the money that we are going to need to keep BC communities safe from climate change. At the same time, we can ensure that the costs of climate change are factored into business decisions, forcing industry to change.

Key supporting facts:

- In the Netherlands, Friends of the Earth (MillieuDefensie) sued Shell and won. Now the company is required to take responsibility for the emissions from its products.
- In the U.S. twenty local governments and three states are suing fossil fuel companies for climate costs.
- Big Tobacco and Big Asbestos believed that they could not be sued, but lawsuits against them were successful and changed the public perception of their profitability and responsibility. The lawsuit against Big Oil can do the same.
- 28 law professors from across Canada wrote to local governments in BC underscoring that there is a legal basis for a lawsuit against fossil fuel companies for climate costs.⁹
- When a class action lawsuit is launched, fossil fuel companies will need to notify their shareholders and investors that they are being sued for climate impacts, changing the perceived profitability of these companies and the business decisions that they and others will make.
- In a class action lawsuit many local governments work together to bring a lawsuit, sharing resources and keeping risks manageable.

- A lawsuit can be brought in BC courts against global fossil fuel companies because the damage occurred in BC. Rather than just targeting Canadian emissions, suing Big Oil lets us tackle climate change as a global problem.

Tips and strategies:

- Lawsuits can seem technical, at their core lawsuits hold people who act badly responsible and ensure that industry cannot profit from harming others.
- Emphasize that legal experts say that a lawsuit against fossil fuel companies has a solid basis in Canadian law.
- To learn more, read the letter from 28 law professors or join our trainings.

Why this key message works:

It has never been legal for companies to sell products that they know will destroy property and kill people. British Columbians are frustrated with inaction on climate change and are looking for solutions that will protect us from future climate impacts.

Since these companies, and their investors, have assumed that the public will pay for climate change while they pocket the profits, a lawsuit directly challenges the business structures that have led to the climate crisis.

⁹ https://allard.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/2020-08/Climate-Litigation-LawProfsLetter_final2.pdf