

Jan. 17, 2023

Thinking critically

Re: the Dec. 22 letter “Critical thinking skills.”

This letter implies that UA students aren’t thinking critically in asking to divest of fossil fuel interests. On the contrary: At a minimum, the students of a UA course called Ecological Catastrophes consider the pros and cons of getting off oil (fossil fuels generally). They realize how hard it is.

Even more, by analyzing ecological catastrophes of the past, they realize that continuing life in the same old way, i.e., following the status quo, can bring consequences that ultimately wreak ecological havoc. Accordingly, they realize that taking little, or even no, meaningful action now on climate change risks ecological catastrophe in the future, their future.

Far from not thinking critically, the students of Ecological Catastrophes are considering problems across multiple scales of time and space, and across concepts. Surely, students in other courses at the UA and elsewhere are thinking just as hard, i.e., critically.

Paul Sheppard, instructor of the UA course, Great US Ecological Catastrophes

Midtown

Dec. 22, 2022

Critical thinking skills

Re: the Dec. 11 article “Students: Divest in fossil fuel.”

Students want the UA to divest stocks that support fossil fuels. All of the students? 10%? 5%? 1%? I’d like to suggest they live in housing with no A/C or heating. They could give up the internet. They could avoid any transportation that uses petroleum and eat only the food they grow.

Or they could learn critical thinking and realize that renewables will never allow them to have all of their critical needs without fossil fuels. They could try to understand cold turkey abandonment of fossil fuels is bad policy. Isn’t that why they go to college in the first place?

Bill Blaine

Marana

tucson.com

Students call on U of A Foundation to divest \$82M from fossil fuels

Kathryn Palmer

9–12 minutes

At an epicenter of the country’s [water crisis](#), some University of Arizona students are calling on the UA Foundation to take a firm stance against climate change and pull the \$82 million it has in fossil fuel-related investments by 2029.

“While we know that the foundation has been supported by money made from fossil fuels, we want to show them that Arizona, Tucson, the U of A — its students and alumni — are in support of renewable energy,” said Samantha Wetherell, president of [UAZ Divest](#), the student-led group calling on the UA Foundation to divest. “We are going to push for sustainability and we want to see the U of A put its money where its mouth is in terms of its sustainable initiatives.”

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This strategy is not unique to the UA.

Over the past decade, student demands for universities to divest in fossil fuels have become a popular rallying cry for environmental activists on campus. And in many instances it’s worked. In 2021

alone, [some 20 higher learning institutions](#) — including Harvard, the University of Minnesota and the California State University System — announced divestment from fossil fuels after facing student pressure to do so.

That momentum made its way to Tucson when a group of students formed UAZ Divest at the UA in 2019.

UAZ Divest

Since then, the group's leaders — some who have since graduated and moved away — have held numerous meetings with administrators, pleading the case for fossil-fuel divestment. But these can be long campaigns, especially because the UA Foundation, which manages a \$1 billion endowment, is a separate entity with a separate governing board from the university.

In addition to demanding the UA Foundation complete a phased divestment from fossil fuels by 2029, UAZ Divest is also demanding the following:

- The UA Foundation publicly commit to no further investments in the fossil fuel industry from this point on.
- The UA and UA Foundation concretely define and implement Environmental, Social Governance (ESG) investment policies and partnerships.
- The UA Foundation include student representation, with voting power, on the Board of Trustees and the Investments Committee.

UA President Robert Robbins met with members of UAZ Divest last February, and Wetherell said he was supportive and pushed for the group to meet with the UA Foundation. “However,” she

added, “we haven’t had any written support from him, we’ve only had verbal support.”

When members of UADivest finally did get a formal meeting with the foundation in August, they didn’t get the feedback they’d hoped for.

“Their answer was generally no,” Wetherell said. “They don’t seem to have any interest in ever doing a public fossil fuel divestment or any kind of divestment.”

Roughly 7% of the foundation’s investments are tied to fossil fuels, and according to UA Spokeswoman Pam Scott, it has not made any new such investments since 2019. Even if that indicates a slow, recent move away from fossil fuels, the foundation would still have a lot to lose if it divested its existing holdings in the industry.

“The Foundation does not hold direct equity investments in publicly-traded oil and gas companies; rather, these fossil fuel investments are part of privately managed funds,” Scott said in an email to the Arizona Daily Star. “Private Energy was the top performer in the portfolio in FY 2022, up 44.1%.”

‘Losses loom large’

The UA Foundation’s reluctance to publicly support divesting from fossil fuels hasn’t stopped Wetherell and the other members of UAZ Divest from continuing to gather signatures for their divestment petition and publicizing their cause.



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Stella Heflin, a founding member of UAZ Divest, speaks to the crowd at a rally on Sept. 23, 2022 at the University of Arizona Mall. UAZ Divest is a student-led group calling on the UA Foundation to divest its \$82 million in fossil fuels by 2029.

Kathryn Palmer

At a rally on the UA Mall in late September, more than 30 students and faculty members came out to amplify the message of fossil fuel divestment.

“Divestment is not an end, but a beginning. Divestment is a doorway to a better future on this campus,” David Sbarra, a psychology professor at the UA who studies how people respond to change, said at the rally. “Why is it so hard to change? Because losses loom large. And no loss looms larger for this institution than

the loss of money. We need to create a positive future. We need to stop the fear and stop this way of thinking by suggesting there's more.”

Jennie Stephens, a professor of sustainability science and policy at Northeastern University in Boston who has studied campus divestment movements, said accepting the need to reduce reliance on non-renewable energy is critical to creating more sustainable energy policies in the long term.

“A lot of climate policy has focused on the science and technology of new (resources). But we actually need to resist and focus on phasing out fossil fuels. For a big transition you need both,” Stephens said. “That’s where the case for fossil fuel divestment is strong and growing.”

Although the rise of electric cars and solar energy generates media buzz, the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported that in 2021 fossil fuels — those include petroleum, natural gas and coal — accounted for [79% of primary energy production](#). Those energy sources are used in nearly every aspect of modern American life, including fertilizing crops, transporting goods across the country, and heating buildings.

The wide majority of the scientific community is in [agreement](#) that reliance on fossil fuels is not sustainable for the planet. But the stormy American political climate — which is regularly influenced by the powerful fossil fuel lobby — has yet to produce a unified front on phasing out fossil fuels.

That disconnect is perhaps most obvious at public research universities like the UA, where scientists are working on the latest environmental research in a state that has not yet developed a

[statewide climate action plan.](#)

“Fossil fuel divestment at universities is one way of demonstrating resistance to reliance on fossil fuels and acknowledging the science that supports that,” Stephens said. “Each university (that pledges fossil fuel divestment) builds part of this solidarity that’s resisting. The idea behind it is acknowledging the power and influence the fossil fuel industry has had and taking back some of that power for the public good.”

UA drafting climate action plan

The student activism driving UAZ Divest is what drove creation of the UA’s Office of Sustainability in 2011.

But aside from setting the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2040, not much changed on the UA’s sustainability policies until Robbins became president in 2017. The following year, the UA restructured and expanded the Office of Sustainability, and charged it with creating the school’s [first sustainability and climate action plan](#) by 2023.

“We are in a better place than we were a few years ago,” said Trevor Ledbetter, director of the Office of Sustainability who is working on both the UA’s climate action plan and the city of Tucson’s. “We do have quite a way to go. But the support of our administration and the advocacy of our community is really helping us to accelerate our sustainability and climate action in a way I haven’t seen at most institutions.”

The university’s biggest accomplishment to date, Ledbetter said, was the agreement it made in 2019 with Tucson Electric Power to source all electricity the UA uses from renewable resources, which

at the time was the largest agreement of its type in North America.

At the same time, however, many universities of UA's size — including Arizona State University — have already developed concrete climate action plans.

Calling on the UA Foundation to divest in fossil fuels won't be a part of the plan Ledbetter and his team are writing.

“From a student's perspective, I agree with it. Us holding stocks in fossil fuels runs directly counter to our goals to be carbon neutral,” Ledbetter said. But, he also recognizes that the separation between the UA Foundation and the university puts pushing for divestment out of his office's purview. “We do hope to have conversations with people at the foundation, but more to advocate for fundraising priorities.”

He added that if the foundation did agree to divest from fossil fuels in the future, it would send a powerful message about the alignment of UA's finances with its values.

But, divesting would still only be one step toward achieving a much larger end goal of creating an environmentally sustainable campus. “We have a very large operational footprint and greenhouse gas footprint, so we do need to be taking action on our side and in our physical infrastructure to transition it to low or zero carbon as quickly as possible,” he said.

For Eloise Standifer, secretary of UAZ Divest and a junior studying political economics, pushing for any change is better than doing nothing to preserve the natural resources she hopes to live off for many decades to come.

“It's not going to save the world,” she said, “but it's a good first

step.”

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