

# Question

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**TO:** Senate

**FROM:** Senators Sobat, Noyhouzer and Ritchie

**SUBJECT:** Question and Response Regarding Divestment from Fossil Fuels

**MEETING DATE:** January 13, 2016

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**PREAMBLE:** WHEREAS the COP21 Paris Agreement will commit 196 countries to preventing a 1.5° increase in global warming above pre-industrial levels;

WHEREAS fossil fuel companies have been shown to impair efforts to adhere to such protocols through exploration and extraction of fossil fuel reserves and by undermining the transition toward renewable and sustainable energy sources;<sup>1</sup>

WHEREAS divestment campaigns have historically been a successful means by which public institutions can apply pressure on and change the practices of regimes and industries engaged in documented social injury;

WHEREAS in February 2015, Divest McGill submitted its second petition and research report to the Committee to Advise on Matters of Social Responsibility (CAMSR), asking the University to divest its holdings from the top 200 fossil fuel companies;<sup>2</sup>

WHEREAS the University of Toronto *President's Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels* recently recommended immediate targeted divestment from fossil fuel companies whose activities “disregard a 1.5-degree threshold” of global warming, citing “the University’s fundamental role as an academic community leader;”<sup>3</sup>

WHEREAS the McGill Faculty of Arts Council, the Students’ Society of McGill University (SSMU), the Post-Graduate Students’ Society (PGSS) and the Arts Undergraduate Society (AUS) are among the groups that have endorsed Divest McGill’s petition;

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<sup>1</sup> “Industry Ignored its Scientists on Climate,” *The New York Times* (April 23, 2009)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/24/science/earth/24deny.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Carbon at All Costs: The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment,” *Divest McGill* (February 2, 2015)

[http://divestmcgill.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Feb2015\\_CAMSR\\_Submission\\_Brief.pdf](http://divestmcgill.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Feb2015_CAMSR_Submission_Brief.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “Report of the President’s Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels,” *University of Toronto* (December 15, 2015), <http://www.president.utoronto.ca/secure-content/uploads/2015/12/Report-of-the-Advisory-Committee-on-Divestment-from-Fossil-Fuels-December-2015.pdf>

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**QUESTION:**

1. Given the scope of the current divestment movement, including media coverage, endorsements, and divestment decisions at other institutions, is the University concerned that a lack of action on this issue might impact McGill's academic reputation and integrity as a research institution?
  2. What is the university's responsibility in finding non-fossil fuel based funding sources and experiential learning opportunities for students and researchers? How does this role relate to McGill's overall vision of sustainability as outlined in the Vision 2020 Sustainability Strategy?
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**Question 1: Response from Secretary-General Stephen Strople:**

McGill University has been actively engaged with the issue of global warming and the impact of fossil fuel emissions on climate change for several years.

The University hired its first Director of Sustainability in 2008 and established the Office of Sustainability in 2009. It adopted "Vision 2020: A Sustainability Strategy", in Spring 2014. The Strategy includes 23 goals and 14 priority actions across five categories: research, education, connectivity, operations, governance and administration. At October 30, 2015, 51% of the Vision 2020 deliverables have been completed.

McGill has made a significant commitment to interdisciplinary academic strength in sustainability science and social science through initiatives such as the Chairs in Green Chemistry and Climate Change Mitigation, the School of the Environment and the Trottier Institute on Sustainability. Senator Goldstein addresses this in the response to Question 2 below.

McGill is one of 34 Canadian universities actively processing proposals to divest holdings in fossil fuel companies as part of a broad 350.org campaign. Several including Dalhousie, Concordia, Queen's, Trent, Toronto, Guelph, Calgary and Simon Fraser have undertaken preliminary consideration of the proposals and issued reports with various recommendations. In many cases, including McGill, processes are ongoing.

The Divest McGill petition falls within the mandate of the Board of Governors Committee to Advise on Matters of Social Responsibility (CAMSR), which has been in existence in various forms since the 1970s.

Divest McGill submitted its petition to CAMSR on February 2, 2015. Since February 19, 2015, when CAMSR first reviewed the petition, it has met seven times in ongoing consideration of the submission. Four of these meetings have included representatives of, and presentations by, Divest McGill. CAMSR also has consulted with members of the academic staff of McGill whose research and scholarship deal with climate change.

CAMSR has committed to conclude its deliberations and issue a report on the Divest McGill petition by the end of March.

## **Question 2: Response from Dr. Rosie Goldstein, Vice-Principal (Research and International Relations)**

As noted in the Report on Research and Innovation 2015, McGill receives more than 90% of its annual sponsored research funding from non-industry sources, with around 70% of funding coming from the federal and provincial governments. Funding from industry partners remains a relatively small portion of our research funding overall. For example, in FY14, \$37 million out of a total of \$478 million in sponsored research funding (8%) came from industry partners of all types. Since 2008, sponsored research funding from easily identifiable fossil fuel companies, such as Imperial Oil and Shell Canada, has amounted to approximately \$678,000 total for that period.

McGill is deeply committed to sustainability as a goal and value in all aspects of our research enterprise, as outlined in the [Strategic Research Plan \(SRP\) 2013-2017](#), which includes “Sustainability” as one of the “five core commitments” McGill makes in pursuit of research excellence. Our commitment is further articulated in the [Vision 2020 Sustainability Strategy](#), which states:

*“Sustainability in research encapsulates the ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘who’ of research at McGill: We consider research activities conducted both on campus and elsewhere. It includes themes such as collaboration, interdisciplinarity, community engagement, the social-ecological footprint of the research process, and applied student research.”*

Vision 2020 has a clear set of priority actions for 2014-16. Noteworthy accomplishments so far include the creation of a Sustainable Labs Working Group, which is engaging relevant faculty, staff and student groups to develop a sustainability checklist to be incorporated into lab safety inspections; as well as the Applied Student Research initiative, which is identifying and facilitating opportunities for applied student research that advances sustainability.

Moreover, through NSERC CREATE programs in Green Chemistry, led by C.J. Li, and Environmental Innovation, led by Murray Humphries, as well as activities in the lab of Robin Rogers, the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Green Chemistry and Green Chemicals, to name just three examples, McGill offers world-class experiential learning opportunities directly related to sustainability. McGill is also at the forefront of the development of sustainable, advanced biofuels as the host institution of BioFuelNet Canada, which is funded in part through the Canadian Network of Centres of Excellence Program and based in the Quartier de l’innovation. A final example is McGill’s partnership with [Mitacs](#), through which the University provides students with a broad range of experiential learning opportunities in companies and non-profit organizations from all sectors. It is worth noting, however, that of the 137 McGill-related projects listed on the Mitacs website, no project is classified as taking place in the oil and gas industry.

The University aims to foster and grow sustainability in all aspects of our mission. From the Office of Sustainability to the upcoming [McGill Symposium on Science for a Sustainable Society](#), there are countless examples of how, as stated in the SRP, “McGill faculty, staff, students, and administrators are citizens who consider the environmental, social, and economic contexts and consequences of their work.”