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MORE COMMUNITIES SEEK TO PROTECT TAXPAYERS FROM INCREASING COSTS OF WILDFIRE, DROUGHT, RISING SEAS AND EXTREME PRECIPITATION
City, County of Santa Cruz Go to Court to Hold Largest Fossil Fuel Corporations Accountable for Contributions to Climate Change

(Santa Cruz, CA) - The City of Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz County today joined a growing chorus of communities that are standing up for their residents and businesses as they face mounting financial, environmental, and public health costs tied to global warming. They filed separate lawsuits in California Superior Court that for the first time go beyond prior complaints for climate change-related damages.

Today's filings seek to hold accountable 29 oil, gas, and coal companies not just for damages associated with sea level rise, but also for changes to the hydrologic cycle caused by greenhouse gas pollution from the companies' products, including more frequent and severe wildfires, drought, and extreme precipitation events. Recent reports from the American Meteorological Society and others confirm that these kinds of serious climate-related changes result from warming of the planet caused by increases in greenhouse gases.

"With miles of coastlines and steep, forested mountains, Santa Cruz County is particularly vulnerable to impacts from climate change," said County Supervisor Ryan Coonerty. "It's time for Big Oil, who chose profit over people and the environment, to be held responsible. It's time for oil companies to pay for the damage they've caused, rather than ask local residents to pick up all the costs associated with protecting us from sea level rise, increasing fires, and severe weather."

According to the complaints:

Defendants have known for nearly 50 years that greenhouse gas pollution from their fossil fuel products has a significant impact on the Earth's climate and sea levels....Instead of working to reduce the use and combustion of fossil fuel products, lower the rate of greenhouse gas emissions, minimize the damage associated with continued high use and combustion of such products, and ease the transition to a lower carbon economy, Defendants concealed the dangers, sought to undermine public support for greenhouse gas regulation, and engaged in massive campaigns to promote the ever-increasing use of their products at ever greater volumes....Defendants are directly responsible for 215.9 gigatons of CO₂ emissions between 1965 and 2015, representing 17.5% of total emissions of that potent greenhouse gas during that period.

Numerous peer-reviewed scientific studies show clearly that pollution from oil, gas, and coal is causing the oceans and atmosphere to warm, sea levels to rise, and wildfires, drought and extreme precipitation events to skyrocket. The fossil fuel companies have known for decades that the consequences of business-as-usual combustion of their products could be catastrophic and that only a narrow window of time existed to take action before the damage might be irreversible.

They were so certain of the threat that some even took steps to protect their own assets from rising seas and more extreme storms, and they developed new technologies to profit from drilling in a soon-to-be ice-free Arctic.

“These companies not only understood the consequences of fossil fuel use on global climate change, but their own scientists did much of the early, groundbreaking research, and issued detailed warnings decades ago,” said Mayor David Terrazas. “The fact that they later worked hard to discredit the science is extremely troubling, and may well have delayed actions that could have prevented serious, global impacts. This lawsuit raises serious issues and deserves a full public discussion.”

In Santa Cruz County, expected sea level rise by 2030 of four inches would put 850 buildings and assets valued at \$742 million at risk. Beyond sea level rise, the County has incurred hundreds of millions of dollars in expenses for planning, permitting, and repair due to severe winter storms in recent years that were made worse by climate change caused by greenhouse gas pollution from fossil fuels. Mounting instances of wildfire are also cause for great concern for the County, which must prepare for increasing costs of fire suppression as well as secondary public health costs associated with wildfire.

The City of Santa Cruz also has serious vulnerabilities to climate change and faces significant adaptation costs. Under the same 2030 scenario of four inches of sea level rise, more than 70 buildings, over a half mile of roadway, and more than two miles of water, wastewater and storm drain pipe infrastructure valued at \$152 million is at risk. The City has spent millions of dollars in response to flooding and storm damage exacerbated by rising seas and extreme rain events. Coastal erosion is already a serious issue, and portions of main roadways may need to be fortified or completely replaced. Moreover, Santa Cruz deals with significant water supply system shortages and substantial wildfire risk, both of which will increase if, as is projected, heat waves, droughts, and changes to the hydrological cycle become more extreme or frequent.

The plaintiffs filing this complaint are represented by their respective county and city attorneys, and assisted by outside counsel from Sher Edling LLP.

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