Canadian doctors’ group calls for ban on fossil fuel ads in open letter

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Ivan Semeniuk

The federal government should ban the advertising of fossil fuels, including gasoline-powered vehicles and household natural gas, because of their detrimental effects on health and the environment, a coalition of Canadian physicians and related organizations says.

In an open letter released on Monday, more than 34 professional health groups said that stronger measures are needed to prevent the spread of misinformation about fossil fuels and to require companies to disclose the negative consequences of their use.

In the absence of such disclosures, the letter argues, consumers are encouraged to make purchases that lead to higher consumption of fossil fuels, raising pollution levels that contribute to a host of health issues while countering Canada’s efforts to meet its emission reduction targets.

"Advertising does drive demand, and in a climate crisis demand for more fossil fuels is the last thing we need," said Melissa Lem, a family doctor in Vancouver and spokesperson for the campaign, led by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), a health-advocacy group.

Dr. Lem said the open letter echoes earlier efforts to ban cigarette advertising, which came into effect in Canada starting in 1989. Though the use of fossil fuels is more widespread and more global in its environmental effect than tobacco, it has often been promoted to consumers in a similar way - through lifestyle messaging - with similar effectiveness.

In one example cited in the open letter, a report by the environmental group Équiterre found that nearly 80 per cent of money spent on car advertising is focused on oversized gasoline-powered light trucks, including SUVs, which have higher emissions than standard-size cars. Statistics Canada figures show that last year such vehicles accounted for more than three quarters of new car purchases nationwide.

Given that the federal government has set a mandatory deadline of 2035 for ending the sale of new gasoline-powered vehicles, there is cause for restricting the promotion of their use, said Leah Temper, who is the fossil fuel ad-ban campaign director for CAPE.

"Advertising … is trying to get consumers at that point where they're making pivotal choices, and a lot of these choices will lock them in for many years," she said.

Other countries have enacted or are considering similar restrictions on advertising. For example, Norway has been strict on car makers, including those who make hybrid vehicles that still require gasoline, in preventing descriptions such as "environmentally friendly" in advertisements. In France, a new law requires advertisers to state how much carbon vehicles emit and will ban ads for vehicles above a certain threshold by 2028.

Organizations that have signed on to the Canadian campaign for a ban represent...
some 700,000 health professionals, including the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions.

As outlined in the open letter, a key concern of the groups is not just the impact of fossil fuels on climate and its related global effects, but the more direct health problems that accompany exposure to fossil fuel combustion, including vehicle exhaust.

In an independent analysis led by the Health Effects Institute in Boston and published this month in Environment International, a research journal, scientists looked at more than 350 studies and concluded with strong confidence that traffic-related air pollution is associated with high mortality in general and mortality because of cardiovascular disease in particular. It is also associated with a higher risk of lung cancer in adults and asthma and acute lower respiratory infections in children with moderate to high confidence.

Other reviews point to the long-term health risks of cooking with natural gas, including elevated indoor levels of nitrogen dioxide, which can irritate airways.

Naomi Oreskes, a Harvard professor and author of 2010’s Merchants of Doubt, which chronicles industry efforts to mislead the public on a range of issues from tobacco smoke to fossil fuels, said she welcomed the Canadian initiative and said it is well supported by evidence.

"The industry uses advertising to sustain demand, to inhibit effective climate policies, and to confuse the public about the known adverse effects of their products," Dr. Oreskes added. "A ban on such advertising seems well-justified, as it was with tobacco in an earlier era."

However, David Swannor, a lawyer and adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa who specializes in legal efforts to reduce cigarette smoking, cautioned that advertising bans can backfire if they restrict consumers from learning about healthier options in cases where it is not possible to completely stop using a type of product. In this case, that could include alternatives that are more efficient in their use of fossil fuels.

"There's got to be some sort of out, or you can end up supporting the more hazardous thing because it's already entrenched in the market," he said.

In a statement, Jay Avenrill, a spokesperson for the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said that his organization supports transparency and has published reports on emissions and innovation performance, among other measures.

"Advertising is one way we can reach Canadians to ensure they are informed of the progress their natural gas and oil industry is making on these critical issues," he said.

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