

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### MIT Administration Debates Divestment While Harvard's Dismisses It

*In response to 3,000 nerds-turned-activists, MIT's administration hosts an unprecedented public debate on whether MIT should divest from fossil fuels, just days before Harvard students and celebrities begin a week of civil disobedience to confront their administration's stonewalling.*

**CAMBRIDGE, MA** – Today, amidst calls from [more than 3,000](#) MIT members for divestment of the Institute's \$12.4 billion endowment from the fossil fuel industry, the MIT [Climate Change Conversation](#) committee, charged by MIT's President Rafael Reif, hosted "[Should MIT Divest? A Debate on Fossil Fuel Investment](#)".

The debate was attended by 500 members of MIT and the wider community and featured six prominent climate change figures: [Naomi Oreskes](#), [Don Gould](#), and [John Sterman](#) for divestment; and [Brad Hager](#), [Frank Wolak](#), and [Timothy Smith](#) against it.

"We present what we believe is a first-of-its-kind occurrence: A serious campus-wide debate on the pros and cons of fossil fuel divestment, sponsored by the university senior administration that is being petitioned," opened MIT Vice President Maria Zuber.

MIT's response to divestment is unique among universities with multi-billion dollar endowments. Two miles down the road at Harvard University students have been forced to resort to [blockades](#) and [occupations](#), one [arrested](#), in an effort to engage the administration in a similar dialogue. The MIT debate comes just three days before [Harvard Heat Week](#) - a week of "civil disobedience" coordinated with [student escalations](#) nationwide.

"When the history of our time is written... let it show that MIT had the courage to act when Harvard and other prominent educational institutions chose not to," urged pro-divestment debater Pitzer College trustee Don Gould, to which the audience erupted into applause.

MIT Professor John Sterman began the debate, "Divestment is not only right, it is powerful.... We will energize the growing movement to cut emissions on campus and around the world. We will blaze a path to a future in which all people can thrive, thus fulfilling the mission of MIT, which calls upon us to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind."

Naomi Oreskes argued for divestment on the basis of the fossil fuel industry's record of "challenging the science...supporting attacks on scientists...[and] aggressively lobbying against reasonable public policies." While there was debate about the appropriate breadth of divestment, even the anti-divestment side made little objection to targeting companies complicit in disinformation.

The anti-divestment side repeatedly propped up what one MIT student divestment advocate characterised as "strawman arguments". "A university like MIT can do better," Frank Wolak insisted. "I hate to sound like a parrot economist," he said, despite his repeated proposals of "a price on carbon" as a better alternative to divestment. Harvard Professor Naomi Oreskes responded, "We completely agree a price on carbon is very

strongly needed... but how do we get the political will to pass a carbon tax?... The opposition keeps putting this as a false dichotomy, an 'either/or'. We are saying this is a 'both/and'". To the audience's amusement, anti-divestment debater Tim Smith agreed: "I like the 'both/and' too."

MIT Professor Brad Hager, debating against divestment, pointed out the dependence of MIT research on fossil fuel industry funding and instead suggested that, "We should engage those who are moving and can be nudged in the right direction." But he also acknowledged that "some [fossil fuel companies] have an irresponsible cowboy mentality, plundering and laying waste." MIT Executive Committee member and Wellesley College President Emerita Diana Walsh commented after the debate, "Professor Hager's story on the con side was compelling." But overall, she said, "All of us in Kresge [Auditorium] could feel the pro-divestment team swaying the audience." Earlier today, Walsh published an [opinion article](#) calling on universities to follow their students' lead and seriously consider the options on the table - including divestment - for addressing climate change.

The divestment debate was the fourth and final event of the MIT [Climate Change Conversation](#) - a [campus-wide debate](#) about what actions MIT should take in the face of the climate crisis. It was [launched](#) by President Reif in May 2014 after more than a year of negotiations between the administration and MIT's student climate change action group pushing for divestment, [Fossil Free MIT](#). More than [3,000 MIT members](#) have signed Fossil Free MIT's [petition for divestment](#), including almost one-in-three of all undergraduates and [over 80 MIT faculty](#). With the debate over, [the committee will](#) now ask the entire MIT community, through [six Listening Tour events](#), "which climate actions it would like to see MIT take." This will inform the committee's [final report](#) to MIT's administration, due June 5, 2015, which will in turn "[recommend](#) to the President a path forward."

Diana Walsh said after the debate, "The clear 'winner' was the case for a comprehensive approach worthy of MIT."

Fossil Free MIT member Patrick Brown summed up, "I think this debate is an important first step, especially compared to Harvard's flat rejection of divestment. We expect MIT to take bold leadership on this issue by heeding the voices of the more than 3,000 MIT members calling for fossil fuel divestment as part of an ambitious, wide-ranging climate action plan."

**Debate recording is available here: [http://webcast.amps.ms.mit.edu/spr2015/Climate\\_Change/09apr/](http://webcast.amps.ms.mit.edu/spr2015/Climate_Change/09apr/)**

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**On the day of the divestment debate, MIT students turned the 105 windows of MIT's five-story Chemistry building into giant pixels spelling out "DIVEST", in characteristic MIT 'hacking' tradition.**

Photo Credit: Patrick Brown

[High res version at: <http://www.fossilfreeMIT.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/MIT-DIVEST-Hack.jpg>]



**MIT divestment debate**

Photo Credit: Patrick Brown

[High res version at: <http://www.fossilfreeMIT.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/MIT-Divestment-Debate.jpg>]