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MIT should divest from coal and tar sands, presidential committee report suggests

MIT presidential climate change committee supports divestment from coal and tar sands, and proposes ethics advisory council to combat investments in disinformation.

CAMBRIDGE, MA – Amidst calls from [more than 3,400](#) MIT members to divest the Institute's \$12.4 billion endowment from fossil fuels, a presidential committee [report, released Monday](#), supports divestment from coal and tar sands, and potentially other fossil fuels. The [committee](#) was tasked by MIT's president [last September](#) with "launch[ing] an open, campus-wide conversation on how MIT can lead in confronting climate change."

The report outlines a variety of steps MIT's administration should take to address climate change, including "support by a (three-quarter) majority of the committee for targeted divestment from companies whose operations are heavily focused on the exploration for and/or extraction of the fossil fuels that are least compatible with mitigating climate change, for example, coal and tar sands."

The committee also recommends MIT form an "Ethics Advisory Council" to "explicitly combat disinformation and avoid inadvertently supporting disinformation through investments..." The council could lead to "engagement with and ultimately divestment from entities that persist in spreading disinformation." Other steps proposed include implementing a campus-wide price on carbon, establishing a "Climate Institute" to support research on climate mitigation, and "transforming the campus into a Living Laboratory for climate change." "The time has come for MIT to play a prominent, visible part in the action and solutions needed to confront the climate challenge," the committee emphasizes.

Student divestment campaigner Ioana Knopf commented, "As this report makes clear, climate change is not only an unprecedented threat to the livelihoods of MIT's students, but also an immense opportunity for the Institute to make climate action its defining legacy of the twenty-first century. We urge the administration to heed the committee's recommendations, and begin divesting from fossil fuels as part of a multi-faceted climate action plan"

The report, *MIT and the Climate Challenge*, is the outcome of President L. Rafael Reif's [Climate Change Conversation](#); a year-long campus-wide discussion, which included a [high-profile public debate on divestment](#), about what actions MIT should take in the face of the climate crisis. In his [commencement address to graduates of the class of 2015](#), Reif last week echoed the report by acknowledging that it was the student group calling for divestment, [Fossil Free MIT](#), which "inspired" the *Climate Change Conversation*.

The committee's report now has a 30-day community comment period, after which senior administrators "will weigh the issues and options, and offer recommendations to President Reif" who, early in the fall semester, will then announce "an Institute plan for how MIT can lead in addressing climate change." The

report comes one week after [79 MIT faculty](#) and [21 MIT student groups](#) sent separate open letters to the president [calling for climate action](#), including divestment. Faculty signatories included National Medal of Science physicist [Daniel Kleppner](#), Pulitzer Prize winner and MacArthur 'Genius' Fellow [Junot Díaz](#), and 2005 "world's top public intellectual" [Noam Chomsky](#), whose recent [public endorsement of MIT divestment](#) has been watched almost 90,000 times.

The report emphatically calls on MIT to take more aggressive action, explaining that while “there is no greater problem confronting humanity today than climate change...[it] has not risen to the top of the Institute’s agenda in a way that reflects either the gravity of the problem or the magnitude of MIT’s potential contributions.” “The Institute should not eschew exceptional measures,” the report adds. “The Institute should take bold action...at the highest levels and ideally as part of a strong climate action plan.”

The committee argues in favour of divestment from coal and tar sands in part because “their continued large-scale use is incompatible with economically mitigating climate change.” [Reports show](#) that MIT [continues to hold](#) direct investments in coal; its 5% stake in mountaintop removal coal mining company Rhino Resource Partners LP makes it the company’s second largest owner. Recent MIT [SEC filings](#) also show investments in Exxon Mobil, BP, and Halliburton, among others.

The idea of “blanket” divestment from all fossil fuel companies, however, did not find broad support among the committee, who worried “that such action could cause significant loss of engagement opportunities with companies.” The committee also cautioned against “lumping together firms that differ dramatically in their roles in the climate issue.”

Graduate student, committee member, and Fossil Free MIT campaigner Geoffrey Supran, dissented with the Committee's rejection of full divestment in a personal statement at the end of the report: “I wish to dissociate myself from the notion that these concerns are sufficient grounds to reject a broad and nuanced formulation of fossil fuel divestment...The concerns raised by our Committee are understandable, yet they represent constraints on a solvable problem for which an optimized solution exists.” He proposes a “balanced approach” of conditional divestment that “avoids painting all fossil fuel companies with a single brush and gives fossil fuel companies [a three year] opportunity, in good faith, to realign their business practices with international climate targets.”

MIT’s endowment would be the second largest of any university to divest from fossil fuels. [Stanford](#), [Georgetown](#), and [Oxford](#) have all recently pledged to pull investments from coal, joining a total of more than \$2 trillion of assets worldwide.

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