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Chair, Presidential Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels  
Office of the President  
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Dear Members of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels:

We are writing to express our support for divestment by the University of Toronto (U of T) from the 200 global fossil fuel companies with the largest reserves of coal, oil, and gas. We concur with the divestment brief prepared by Toronto350.org explaining how divestment from these 200 companies is in keeping with the university's existing policies and how it would be both morally and financially prudent<sup>1</sup>.

As a school of public health, we strive to improve and protect the health of populations in Canada, and globally. Climate change is threatening the health and livelihoods of populations all around the world. Public health practitioners and researchers are increasingly recognizing climate change as a public health issue. On World Health Day in 2008, Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, called climate change "one of the greatest challenges of our time"<sup>2</sup>. In 2015, the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change found that "tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century"<sup>3</sup>, and on August 26 of this year, the Canadian Medical Association voted to divest from fossil fuels. We add our voice to a growing body of medical and health organizations recognizing the dangers that climate change poses to health and the need for climate change mitigation to protect our livelihoods.

We know that the burning of fossil fuels is already changing the Earth's climate. These changes to Earth's systems have both direct and indirect impacts on human health. Increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events and natural disasters such as heat waves, storms, floods and wildfires have all been linked to anthropomorphic climate change and human health<sup>4,5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Toronto350.org. *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment: Update*. 2015.  
<http://www.uoftfacultydivest.com/files/fossil-fuel-divest-new.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. [http://www.who.int/world-health-day/dg\\_message/en/](http://www.who.int/world-health-day/dg_message/en/)

<sup>3</sup> Watts et al. (2015). Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health. *Lancet* S0140-6736(15)60854-6.

<sup>4</sup> Zommers and Singh (2014). *Reducing Disaster: Early Warning Systems for Climate Change*.

<sup>5</sup> Pengelly et al. (2007). Anatomy of heat waves and mortality in Toronto: lessons for public health protection. *Can J Public Health*, 98(5):364-8.



Changing precipitation patterns affect the availability of water for drinking and growing food, leading to drought, food insecurity, and undernutrition<sup>6</sup>.

There is evidence that climate-sensitive infectious diseases like malaria, Lyme disease, and West Nile Virus that are carried and spread through vectors are shifting in distribution and may be increasing in incidence in some areas<sup>7</sup>. Shifts in precipitation and temperature changes aggravate water and foodborne disease outbreaks<sup>6</sup>. Air pollution from fossil fuel combustion is linked with increased cancer risk<sup>8</sup>, exacerbates pre-existing health conditions in our most vulnerable populations, and leads to premature death<sup>9</sup>. Coastal populations are threatened by sea level rise, and face the consequences of forced migration<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, fossil fuel extraction can harm the health of communities living around extraction sites. Often, these are Aboriginal communities that have traditionally relied on the land on which fossil fuel extraction activities take place<sup>11</sup>. In Canada, concerns have been raised over the degradation of the land, air and water through tailing ponds, effluent, chemical pollution and the building of pipelines across First Nations territory, and the risk of exposures to wildlife and humans<sup>12</sup>. In keeping with the Principles on Indigenous Education adopted by Canadian universities to “enhance access and success for Aboriginal students in higher education”, U of T can help Aboriginal students by divesting from fossil fuels and by ensuring their home territories are preserved and their health is protected<sup>13</sup>. Reducing health inequities is a fundamental principle of public health. Climate change exacerbates health inequities, as the burning of fossil fuels and the resulting detrimental impacts are felt disproportionately by those who have contributed to it the least<sup>14</sup>.

Of particular relevance to us as members of a School of Public Health, U of T has divested from tobacco companies. Both tobacco and fossil fuels have no safe level of use. The primary business of both tobacco and fossil fuel companies necessarily causes damage to human beings, although each set of companies may engage in other health promoting activities e.g. tobacco sponsorship of sporting events in the past, or fossil fuel company investment in renewable energy sources. Divestment is not about convincing companies which damage public health to abandon their core

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<sup>6</sup> Patz et al. (2014). When it rains, it pours: Future climate extremes and health. *Annals of Global Health*, 80:332-44.

<sup>7</sup> Greer et al. (2008). Climate change and infectious diseases in North America: the road ahead. *CMAJ*, 178(6):715-22.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson, J. (2015). Air pollution, climate change, and health. *Lancet Oncology*, 16(6):e269.

<sup>9</sup> Clean Air Partnership. Air Pollution and Your Health.

[http://www.cleanairpartnership.org/air\\_pollution\\_and\\_your\\_health](http://www.cleanairpartnership.org/air_pollution_and_your_health).

<sup>10</sup> Barnett and Adger (2007). Climate change, human security and violent conflict. *Political Geography*, 26:639-55.

<sup>11</sup> National Aboriginal Health Organization. (2008). *Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada: Cultural Considerations*. Ottawa.

<sup>12</sup> Assembly of First Nations. <http://www.afn.ca/index.php/en/honoring-fire#top>.

<sup>13</sup> University World News. Universities adopt principles on indigenous education.

<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150701144453896>

<sup>14</sup> Toronto Public Health. (2011). Climate Change Adaptation and Health Equity.



business of selling tobacco. Similarly, it is not plausible that shareholder activism will convince coal, oil, and gas companies to stop extracting, distributing and selling these products when they have huge reserves. Nor is divestment an alternative for (or invalidated by) the fact that many university facilities and activities currently rely on fossil fuels or products currently made with fossil fuels. Rather, we call for divestment because it involves taking a public stand in recognition of what is in the common good.

We join the campus coalition that is calling for divestment, including the U of T Faculty Association, individual faculty members and librarians who have signed the open letter at [UofTFacultyDivest.com](http://UofTFacultyDivest.com) (some of whom are included below), the University of Toronto Students' Union, and Graduate Students' Union. U of T would join a growing set of influential actors who have started redirecting investment away from fossil fuel corporations, including: the Canadian Medical Association, California's State Pensions, Georgetown and Stanford Universities, the Rockefeller Foundation (who helped found our first School of Hygiene at the University of Toronto), the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, and the World Council of Churches<sup>15</sup>. This growing movement may help investors around the world rethink the wisdom of existing and new commitments to fossil fuel development and help initiate a redirection toward energy efficiency improvement and climate-safe forms of energy. By becoming the first Canadian university to divest, U of T can set an important positive example in responding to climate change.

Toronto350.org's fossil fuel divestment brief, *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment*, convincingly demonstrates why divestment from these 200 fossil fuel companies is consistent with U of T's *Policy on Social and Political Issues With Respect to University Divestment*. The brief addresses the principles of prudent investment, the Yale University concept of social injury, and actions taken by other bodies with regard to fossil fuel divestment. Taking action on climate change is now directly pertinent to higher education and academic research. Failing to prevent dangerous climate change threatens the prosperity and global stability which institutions of higher learning rely upon, and would profoundly affect the lives of all those whom the university is educating. To say that we must respond promptly and effectively to climate change does not constitute advancing a specific political or social position; rather, it reflects the scientific consensus that action is necessary.

Divestment would be a prudent investment decision compatible with the university's fiduciary duty. The brief demonstrates that the extraction of fossil fuels meets the Yale definition of social injury, as per the scope of health impacts above, and that the Canadian government, other governments, and international organizations have taken action on climate change. It outlines that divestment is compatible with applicable legislative requirements, government and university policies, and the legal standards applicable to prudent institutional investors. The

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<sup>15</sup> A full list is at: <http://gofossilfree.org/commitments/>



extent and significance of U of T's investments in the fossil fuel industry are sufficient to justify divestment, and the 200 companies in question are involved in the undesirable activity of fossil fuel extraction to a degree that justifies divestment. Since the fossil fuels which are extracted by these companies will ultimately be burned – adding to the already-dangerous level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere – extraction itself constitutes social injury.

With regards to the recommendations in the brief, we as members of the DLSPH agree with the first three: that the university should make an immediate statement of principle expressing its intention to divest, immediately stop making new investments in the industry, and instruct its investment managers to divest from direct stock holdings in these 200 companies within five years.

The brief also recommends a number of possible uses for the divested funds. Among them, we strongly support the recommendation that some funds be invested in improving on-campus energy efficiency and reduction in fossil fuel related academic activities such as extensive conference air travel. In this way, U of T can reduce its day-to-day dependence on fossil fuels at the same time as it divests. By making a large investment and using our scientific, economic and social knowledge to prioritize the projects with the largest emission reduction potential, U of T can achieve the maximum possible benefit, while also contributing to climate change mitigation and enhancing its own resilience in the face of anticipated increases in energy costs over time. We also support reinvestment in Socially Responsible Investment funds. This approach would be in keeping with university values and would communicate U of T's dedication to upholding its principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

We call on The Presidential Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels to recommend to President Meric Gertler that divestment is ethically and financially prudent and in line with the existing policies of the university. Divesting from fossil fuels presents an opportunity for the University of Toronto to become a leader in one approach to climate change mitigation and to protect the health of people in Canada and around the world.

Respectfully,

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