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Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR) is a membership organisation promoting responsible science and technology

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Kevin Marvel
CEO, American Astronomical Society
1667 K Street NW
Washington, DC

10th March 2022

Dear Dr Marvel

As Responsible Science campaigner for Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR), I am writing in reference to our October 2019 report, *Irresponsible Science?: How the fossil fuel and arms industries finance professional engineering and science organizations*,^{which} we are expanding to include a number of international organizations.¹ We have now created a short follow-up report which examines the American Astronomical Society (AAS) in relation to these areas, to which we draw your attention.²

Firstly, I would like to recognise the AAS's commitment to reducing its direct carbon emissions.

However, as you will see in the report, we do retain concerns about the AAS's recent record as follows:

- The lack of transparency regarding your investments in specific companies or sectors;
- Potential financial ties to fossil fuel and arms companies;
- The lack of an environmental policy;
- Relatively lax policies with respect to financial ties to fossil fuel and arms companies benchmarked against your peer professional organizations.

In view of these concerns, SGR calls on the AAS to:

1. increase your transparency by disclosing all the specific companies in which you hold investments of more than \$5,000;

2(a). rapidly phase out your financial ties, including investments and advertising, from any and all companies whose carbon emission targets or activities are not currently in line with the 2°C or less Paris Agreement goal - this includes all major companies in the coal, oil and gas sector;

¹ <https://www.sgr.org.uk/publications/irresponsible-science>

² https://www.sgr.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/The_American_Astronomical_Society_Report.pdf

Part of the campaign awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017

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2(b). as a first step on the route to implementing action '2(a)', make no new investments in the coal, oil and gas sectors;

3. direct your fund manager to be guided by fossil fuel free indexes (including from FTSE and MSCI) and schemes such as the Transition Pathway Initiative³ to invest only in firms whose ambitions are currently on track for global warming of 2°C or less, rather than the less stringent criterion of being in line with current government commitments, which are not sufficient to protect the world from 'dangerous' climate change;

4. redirect your investments to industries/ organisations that mitigate climate change and promote planetary health, such as energy conservation, renewable energy and energy storage;

5. estimate and report on the carbon footprint of your investment portfolio using tools such as the Montreal Pledge website⁴;

6. eliminate any financial links to corporations that have received significant penalties in the last five years related to law-breaking or major malpractice or are likely to in the near future;

7. in line with the recommendations of the ShareAction report on investment managers⁵, strengthen the due diligence of your asset manager selection by reviewing their performance in the areas of climate-related voting and engagement, climate-related policy commitments and accounting for impacts of investments, and be aware that signing up to supportive initiatives such as the PRI or Climate Action 100+ does not always correspond with having a fit-for-purpose responsible investment approach;

8. join the Energy Institute and Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) in signing the Pledge to Net Zero⁶;

9. agree and implement environmental policies and practices that aim to minimize the impacts of both your organization itself and your professional members.

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, we strongly encourage the American Astronomical Society to complete actions 1, 2(b), 3, and 5-7 during this year, with the other actions to be completed by mid-2023.

We are sure it will be of interest that, following an approach from Scientists for Global Responsibility in August 2021, the American Geophysical Union launched an internal audit of its financial ties to the fossil fuel industry and, as of October 2021, is in the process of divesting.⁷

Also in the UK, the British Psychological Society, Royal College of Physicians, British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Faculty of Public Health, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health have all now fully divested from fossil fuels, are in the process of doing so, or have committed to do so. The British Medical Association took the lead, beginning its journey back in 2014. All these organisations also exclude investment in arms companies.

³ <https://www.transitionpathwayinitiative.org/>

⁴ <https://www.unpri.org/montreal-pledge>

⁵ <https://shareaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ShareAction-Climate-Report-III-Final.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.pledgetonetzero.org/>

⁷ <https://fromtheprow.agu.org/agu-announces-change-in-investment-strategy/>

In the university landscape, Harvard University, US, and the University of Aberdeen, UK, are just two of the latest institutions to divest from fossil fuels.⁸ In the UK, 87 universities - more than half - have divested⁹ whilst in the US divesting institutions include Boston University, the University of Minnesota, George Washington University, Georgetown University, the University of Michigan and the University of California. Other professional bodies examined in the *Irresponsible Science?* report have tightened up their policies on fossil fuels and arms since its publication. For example, the Geological Society has introduced investment policies that exclude arms and the most carbon-emitting fossil fuels – thermal coal and tar sands - and is going further than this by not currently investing in any form of fossil fuel, whilst the Royal Meteorological Society has excluded investment in fossil fuels and arms, and the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining has ceased to invest in arms and the most carbon-emitting fossil fuels.

You may also be interested in SGR's new Science Oath for the Climate¹⁰, where scientists, engineers and academics commit to holding their professional associations, institutions and employers to these same standards on climate change as they've committed to themselves. To date, the Oath has been signed by 122 leading scientists and engineers in the US.

We believe the shift in wider expectations about good climate governance means that the reputational sensitivity of the issue has only risen since the publication of the *Irresponsible Science?* report, especially given the prominence of the COP26 climate negotiations last year and the resulting international attention on carbon emissions, goals and institutions as well as the recent ruling by a Dutch court that Shell must reduce its carbon emissions in line with the Paris Agreement.¹¹

I look forward to hearing your response. If you reply within two weeks we will take your reply into account as part of our media work around this and similar letters that we have written to a selection of professional scientific organizations. All the letters and accompanying reports will be made public as part of this media work.

Thank you and best wishes

Liam Killeen
Responsible Science Campaigner, SGR

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/10/harvard-university-divest-endowment-fossil-fuels>;
<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/about/strategy-and-governance/fossil-fuel-divestment.php>

⁹ <https://peopleandplanet.org/university-league/methodology/4-ethical-investment>

¹⁰ <https://www.sgr.org.uk/projects/science-oath-climate-text-and-signing>

¹¹ <https://theconversation.com/shell-ordered-to-cut-its-emissions-why-this-ruling-could-affect-almost-any-major-company-in-the-world-161754>