LOCAL, STATE & REGION

Report: Oregon has $5.3 billion invested in fossil fuel companies

BY ANDREW SELSKY
Associated Press

SALEM — The Oregon State Treasury has at least $5.3 billion invested in fossil fuel companies, a coalition of environmental groups said in a report Wednesday that blamed the state for adding to global warming and urged divestment.

Oregon is considered a "green" state, through its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by state agencies and being the first state to commit to stop using coal-fired power. Yet the state treasury is working at cross-purposes with over $1 billion invested in the coal industry alone, Divest Oregon said in its report.

"The state exposes Oregonians to climate and health risks, economic costs, and financial losses" through the investments, the group said.

The amount that Oregon has invested in oil, gas and coal companies — whose products are a leading cause of global warming — is probably far higher than $5.3 billion. That's because the numbers that Divest Oregon obtained from the state treasury through a public records request do not include private equity investments, which are not subject to public disclosure.

The state treasury did not immediately reply to a request for comment. The agency's spokesperson was tied up in a meeting Wednesday of the Oregon Investment Council, which makes investment decisions.

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read, who is a council member, is running for the Democratic nomination for governor in the November elections. One of his platforms is combating climate change.

"As governor, I will lead the effort to decarbonize our economy and avert the worst of this crisis," he said in a recent campaign statement. "I will bring a renewed sense of urgency to building a clean energy economy and the critical infrastructure needed to meet the challenges we face."

Yet Tobias' agency, which manages $130 billion of the state's investment portfolio, including the state employees pension fund, is too deep in investing in fossil fuels and instead should dispose of those investments and put more behind green energy, Divest Oregon said.

Fossil fuels investments also perform worse than fossil-fuel-free alternatives, the report said.

The report's findings of fossil fuel sector investments are far higher than the $1.8 billion that a previous study released in December said was invested in the industry. That report, by the Climate Safe Pensions Network, said its findings were based only on partial data released by the treasury "due to delays in disclosure by the pension fund" and that the actual amount was likely much higher.

A bill that would have increased transparency in the state treasury's investments passed the Oregon House of Representatives in March. But it died in the Senate before receiving a floor vote there when the short legislative session ended.

Eugene Garcia/AP file

Cargo vessels are seen anchored offshore, sharing space with oil platforms, before heading into the Los Angeles-Long Beach port on Oct. 5. The Oregon State Treasury has at least $5.3 billion invested in fossil fuel companies, environmental groups said in a report Wednesday that blamed the state for adding to global warming and urged divestment.

Sen. Jeff Golden, one of the sponsors of that measure, said if he wins reelection this year, he will make another effort in the 2023 session.

"If I'm back in Salem next session, I'll work to advance the divestment discussion," Golden said. "Full public disclosure of investments made possible with public dollars seems like the very least we should all expect."

The burning of fossil fuels like coal and gas emits gases that are a leading cause of global warming and climate change.

Oregon has been suffering the effects of climate change, with a record-breaking heat wave last summer that killed more than 100 people, a severe drought affecting much of the state and worsening wildfires.

"Oregon has a green economy, grounded in renewable energy, agriculture, and a historical commitment to protecting our natural spaces," the environmental groups said in the new report.

"Building on this legacy and leading the country forward requires bold leadership from every governmental agency including, critically, divestment by the Oregon State Treasury."

Meanwhile, more states are taking steps toward divesting.

On Feb. 9, New York state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli announced that the State Common Retirement Fund will restrict investments in 21 shale oil and gas-producing companies that have failed to demonstrate they are prepared for the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Maryland lawmakers passed a bill this session that requires a fiduciary of the State Retirement and Pension System to consider the potential systemic risks of the impact of climate change on the system's assets.

Divest Oregon is a statewide grassroots coalition of individuals and organizations representing unions, racial and climate justice groups, youth leaders and faith communities.

MEDFORD

Cleanup continues after fire, oil release

Associated Press

MEDFORD — Oil cleanup continues after a gas station fire in Medford last week, state officials said.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality said Tuesday that the agency and NEXGEN Logistics had collected and disposed of most of the recoverable oil in and around Bear Creek.

The agency says more than 20,000 gallons of petroleum products — primarily lube oil — were released during the blaze April 12 that spread from the fueling station to adjacent buildings.

EPA spokesman Bill Dunbar told the Mail Tribune the estimate of spilled oil increased to over 20,000 gallons after cleanup crews inspected above-ground tanks containing gasoline, diesel and other petroleum products and determined they were "down more."

DEQ and NEXGEN don't have an estimate of how much oil entered Bear Creek through stormwater systems and how much the fire consumed. NEXGEN operates the Pacific Pride fuel depot in Medford that burned and is paying for incident response including wildlife rescue and recovery efforts, DEQ said.

Some oiled Canada geese and mallard ducks have been taken in by International Bird Rescue for care, DEQ said. The state Department of Fish & Wildlife urges people not to approach or pick up any oiled wildlife and to instead notify trained experts.

Occasional sheens along the creek likely will be seen over the next several weeks to months, officials said.