

What's Driving the Eugene Youth March 2023 Climate Strike?

Background on the big issues that matter to Eugene students and why they believe the community needs to come together to take collective action to defend climate policy.

What is the March 3, 2023 Eugene Youth Climate Strike?

Eugene students are organizing a city-wide intergenerational march on Friday, March 3rd, 2023. The students are inviting community members and organizations from around the city and the state to defend climate policy in Eugene. Youth advocates will be highlighting the dirty deeds of NW Natural, one of the state's largest fossil fuel corporations, and its band of Fossil Fools, who are helping with the corporation's campaign to roll back climate policy with misleading advertising to confuse the public. Their efforts are actively working to undermine the democratic process and strong climate policy. The youth will demand that NW Natural and its Fossil Fools withdraw their support for a ballot referendum on Eugene's electrification ordinance, and be held accountable for their efforts to undermine public process, climate policy, and local democracy.

High school students will walk out of their respective schools around 12pm, with college students and community members leaving from UO's Knight Law School at 12:20pm. The two groups will converge enroute and march downtown, concluding with speeches and a rally at Kesey Square.

NW Natural, the Fossil Fools, and the key issues from the youth:

- **NW Natural (“NW ‘Natural’”)**
 - NW Natural is a fracked gas monopoly and the single largest fossil fuel company in Oregon. The utility is working to roll back climate policy in Eugene and undermine our local democracy through enormous political spending and misleading advertising about the risks to the climate and public health from its dirty product, as well as advancing false solutions for decarbonization to delay electrification policy
 - [NW Natural has spent over \\$650,000 this month](#) to fund a campaign to overturn Eugene's first-in-the-state electrification policy with a ballot referendum, directly undermining the City's efforts to meet the 2014 Climate Recovery Ordinance goals.
 - The utility is targeting children with propaganda. In 2022, reporting highlighted the [corporation's development of pro-gas children's workbooks which it was distributing](#)

[to schools across its distribution area](#). This winter, the corporation [canceled a paid training for teachers it was hosting at its headquarters](#) on a “renewable” gas curriculum it paid over \$100,000 to Bonneville Energy Foundation to develop in the face of a planned protest led by students in Portland.

- The company paid a consultant who did not disclose the reason for her lobbying against climate policies in Oregon, [according to a report by the New York Times](#).
- From lobbying against common sense climate policy at the state and local level, [to filing a lawsuit against the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality’s landmark Climate Protection Program \(CPP\)](#), the corporation is aggressively fighting key regulations aimed at reducing climate pollution and protecting public health.
- The corporation is one of [the most vulnerable gas utilities in the country](#), with over 50% of its connections in jeopardy as local jurisdictions and states move towards electrifying buildings
- Youth and student advocates have been testifying and organizing for over two and a half years to pass this policy. The organizers of this action applaud the Eugene City Council for their leadership and condemn those intent on rolling back this important step toward a just transition.
- More information:
 - [Oregon Gas Utility Wants to Bill Customers Millions for Executive Bonuses and ‘Misleading’ Advertising](#), *DeSmog Blog* (May 9, 2022)
 - [Stop Litigating and Start Cutting Emissions, Citizens’ Utility Board Says to NW Natural and Other Gas Producers](#), *Willamette Week* (March 27, 2022)
 - [Questions loom over the future of natural gas in Oregon](#), *OPB* (January 12, 2021)
 - [Gas Ban Monitor: West Coast pushes new boundaries; pro-gas state bills stall](#), *S+P Global* (April 26, 2022)

- **The Fossil Fools**

- **Eugene Chamber of Commerce**
 - The Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce is a 501(c)(6) organization, and has proven to be NW Natural’s strongest and most enduring local ally in opposing the recently-passed City ordinance, and electrification policy generally.
 - The Eugene Chamber of Commerce is currently hosting the referendum petition on its premises. Its President Brittany Quick-Warner and Director of Marketing and Communications Samantha Roberts (the latter of whom joined the Chamber immediately after resigning from a position within the

City of Eugene's Sustainability Program) have repeatedly testified against electrification and publicly criticized community groups supporting electrification.

- The Chamber has a long track record of collaborating closely with NW Natural in order to shape the direction of climate policy in Eugene. The Chamber and NW Natural were very influential in determining the recommended actions of the City's Climate Action Plan 2.0 (CAP2.0).
- Two things to note about the CAP2.0: (1) the actions proposed in it were not enough to achieve the City's goals in its Climate Recovery Ordinance (50% reduction in fossil fuel use by 2030 and 7.6% annual reductions in city emissions); (2) the central action for building emissions was to negotiate emissions reductions commitments into a renewed franchise agreement with NW Natural, an action that NW Natural repeatedly frustrated by [playing hard-ball](#) in those negotiations, [leading to Eugene deciding to walk away from negotiations in early 2021](#).
- Despite the fact that it was NW Natural's own actions that undermined the goals of the CAP2.0, the Eugene Chamber of Commerce has continued to side with NW Natural on climate policy, and championed an approach to climate policymaking that prioritizes appeasing NW Natural and other fossil fuel interests, rather than achieving actual emissions reductions.
- Under the pretense of trying to come to a compromise on commercial building electrification, representatives of the Chamber of Commerce continued to engage with members of the Fossil Free Eugene coalition mere days before the Chamber publicly announced itself a member of "Eugene for Energy Choice," a front group whose website was entirely owned and controlled by NW Natural and contained nearly-identical content to previous NW Natural-branded websites.
- Publicly, the Chamber has pretended that it had not taken a position on a building electrification ordinance until it received the results of a September 2022 member survey jointly conducted with the Springfield Chamber of Commerce. This omits that the Chamber had been shaping member opinion around electrification for a much longer period. Since at least November 2021, the Chamber had been casting aspersions on electrification policies in private to its members, encouraging members to express concerns about electrification at City Council meetings, coordinating testimony, and offering talking points, research and questions to members that would be willing to testify.

- Nationally, local, regional and national Chambers of Commerce have been at the [forefront of opposing climate policies](#), and [have had their policy positions dominated by fossil fuel members](#). Despite being located in a city and region that overwhelmingly supports climate action, Eugene’s Chamber has shown itself to be no different.
- **Funk/Levis**
 - Funk/Levis is a PR, branding and crisis communications firm that NW Natural has hired to represent their astroturf group.
 - Specifically, Anne Marie Levis has been NW Natural’s representative in the media. Anne Marie Levis has a track record of serving as a spokesperson or Director of electoral campaigns, and lists her business address in disclosing herself as the Director of the Eugene for Energy Choice PAC. Despite this apparent business relationship, Anne Marie has failed to disclose these ties – instead presented herself as an unpaid concerned community member while taking checks from NW Natural and coordinating closely with the fossil fuel corporation.
 - Funk/Levis is also a member, and Anne Marie Levis is a board member, of the Chamber of Commerce. It is unclear whether and to what extent Anne Marie Levis’ business ties have been disclosed to the Chamber’s board, and whether Anne Marie Levis has recused herself from board decisions regarding building electrification.
- **Travel Lane County**
 - Travel Lane County is a 501(c)6 organization that receives 90% or more of its budget from a County transient lodging tax, via a grant awarded to it in 2016 and extended ever since. Its mission is to “increase overnight stays within the county.”
 - Travel Lane County hosts the referendum petition on its premises. Vice President of Stakeholder Relations Andy Vobora has testified [in opposition to the ordinance](#) and electrification generally.
 - In public statements, Andy Vobora has stated that Travel Lane County’s opposition stems from earlier stages of the electrification policy discussion, when the City was considering proceeding with an ordinance that would also cover new commercial construction, and has referred vaguely to a “chilling effect” on businesses from the low-rise residential ordinance.
 - Despite these statements, the relationship between an ordinance covering new residential construction and local tourism numbers is not clear. It is therefore

also not clear whether Travel Lane County's lobbying against the ordinance is "germane" to its mission, as the IRS requires of 501(c)(6) organizations, and whether Lane County revenue – much of which comes from transient lodging within the City of Eugene – is now being used to lobby to overturn City of Eugene laws.

- It is further unclear whether Andy Vobora and Travel Lane County's actions were approved by its 30-member Board of Directors, which includes Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis and Eugene Chamber of Commerce President Brittany Quick-Warner.