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Lawsuit Targets Duke Energy's Decades of Climate Deception, Harm to North Carolina Town

CARRBORO, N.C.— The town of Carrboro [sued](#) Duke Energy Corp. today for the company's decades-long role leading a nationwide climate deception scheme that has worsened the climate crisis, harmed the community and cost the town millions of dollars. The lawsuit seeks to hold Duke Energy accountable for the damages inflicted on Carrboro by the corporation's campaign to delay the transition from planet-heating fossil fuels to renewable energy.

Town officials will hold a [news conference](#) at 2 p.m. today at Carrboro Town Hall to discuss the lawsuit, which is the first to challenge an electric utility for knowingly deceiving the public about fossil fuels' dangers.

"We have to speak truth to power as we continue to fight the existential threat that is climate change. The climate crisis continues to burden our community and cost residents their hard-earned tax dollars," said Carrboro Mayor Barbara Foushee. "Duke Energy's knowledge of the environmental injustice being caused by the use of fossil fuels has unfairly plagued our community for decades. Historically underserved and marginalized communities are facing disproportionate impacts and health risks that are associated with climate change. This was not an easy decision to make but I believe that we must be courageous as we call out these injustices and seek change and accountability."

Today's lawsuit says Duke Energy's top executives have known for more than 50 years about the risks from fossil fuels but have been ringleaders of a widespread campaign to mislead the public about its climate harms and increase reliance on coal and gas for electricity. Carrboro has been working to fight climate chaos and environmental injustice for years, including developing community-based solar programs, implementing climate resilience measures for low-income residents and small businesses, and funding nature-based solutions for stormwater management.

"This lawsuit represents an incredible opportunity to put an end to corporate deception and enter a new era for Carrboro," said Mayor Pro Tem Danny Nowell. "It's time for us to hold Duke Energy accountable for decades of deception, padding executives' pockets while towns like ours worked to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change. This suit will allow the Town of Carrboro to invest new resources into building a stronger, more climate-resilient community, using the damages justly due to our residents to reimagine the ways we prepare for our climate reality."

Duke Energy, the third largest-polluting corporation in the U.S., has worked with industry front groups and PR firms to deceive the public about the science of climate change and block action to combat it, causing Carrboro and its residents significant harm, the lawsuit said.

“The Carrboro community has worked for over five decades to protect, conserve and preserve the environment, the ecosystems and the wellbeing of its citizens,” said Council Member Randee Haven-O’Donnell. “Carrboro is a strong, vibrant community, and Duke Energy needs to be held accountable for the deception and damages it’s caused and continues to cause. Duke Energy’s deceptive public campaign erases the progress we strive for to address climate change. We’re the little engine that could, and we hope other towns can be, too, and hold their polluting utilities accountable. In Carrboro, we’re standing up to be the change we want to see in the world.”

Fossil fuel-driven climate change has battered Carrboro, like the rest of the country, with more frequent and severe storms and flooding, and record-high temperatures. The death and destruction across the region from Hurricane Helene are the latest examples of the worsening climate crisis.

The Town of Carrboro is on the hook for millions of dollars in repairs to roads, rising energy bills and other infrastructure costs to adapt to and mitigate the harms from climate change. Duke Energy is responsible for these damages because the massive utility knew its campaigns to obstruct climate change legislation and mislead the public would accelerate the climate crisis and worsen its impact on the town, the lawsuit said.

“This lawsuit exposes Duke Energy executives as using the tobacco scandal playbook. They’re making the global climate crisis worse despite widespread and accelerating misery,” said Jim Warren, executive director of nonprofit NC WARN. “And they’re still expanding fossil fuels and suppressing renewables – in flat defiance of scientists demanding that we do the exact opposite. We need the judicial system to hold Duke Energy leadership accountable and finally break their corporate control over our political system and public decisions.”

Today’s lawsuit, filed in Orange County Superior Court in Hillsborough, said Duke Energy is damaging the Carrboro community by deceiving its customers and the broader public. Duke Energy [denied the harms](#) from climate change and now claims to be a clean energy leader while it builds more methane gas-burning power plants and suppresses solar and other renewable energy. The utility chooses dirty energy to power homes and businesses but falsely promotes and advertises methane gas as a climate solution.

“We’ll soon have a climate denier-in-chief in the White House, but Carrboro is a shining light in this darkness, taking on one of the country’s largest polluters and climate deceivers,” said Jean Su, energy justice director at the Center for Biological Diversity, which is advising on the case. “Climate action doesn’t stop at a national level, and Carrboro is holding Duke Energy and all fossil utilities’ feet to the fire. This town is paving a way for local governments to drive climate justice despite who’s in Washington.”

Duke Energy provides electricity to 8.2 million monopoly-captured customers across six states, including nearly all of North Carolina as well as parts of South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. One of the largest electric power providers and among the largest corporate polluters in the world, the utility emitted roughly 80 million tons of carbon dioxide in 2021. These emissions were made possible by Duke Energy's decades-long deception campaign.

Eleven states and dozens of municipal and Tribal governments across the country have filed lawsuits to hold major oil and gas companies accountable for deceiving the public about fossil fuels' role in climate change. In October Oregon's Multnomah County, which includes Portland, added the regional gas provider NW Natural to its 2023 lawsuit against fossil fuel corporations for their role in the area's fatal 2021 heat dome.

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