

CONTRIBUTORS **OPINION**

Canadian banks: Stop stalling real climate action

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By Lorraine Green

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I remember that first Earth Day in 1970 well. I was 23 years old, and had just returned to Montreal from a solo, 10-month trip to Europe. That April 22, as more than 20 million Americans poured onto the streets to rally for environmental action, it was the “Quiet Revolution” — not Earth Day — that was gripping most Quebecers. It would be 1990 before I attended my first Earth Day Rally in Toronto.

That same year, 1970, I was enjoying early days of a highly satisfying 24-year career at the Royal Bank of Canada, now RBC.

Five grandchildren and two great-grandsons later, imagine my distress when I learned that my bank of over 50 years is one of the world’s leading funders of fossil fuels — the main driver of the climate crisis that is jeopardizing all of their futures.

RBC is the biggest lender and ranks No. 5 on “The Dirty Dozen” list in the Fossil Fuel Finance Report 2021, but is not alone. Together with TD, Scotiabank, BMO and CIBC, the Big Five Canadian banks have doled out well over half a trillion dollars to the fossil fuel industry since the Paris Climate Agreement was signed in 2015. This, despite urgent warnings from climate scientists that unimaginable harm will occur unless greenhouse gas emissions are cut in half by 2030 to try to keep global warming under 1.5 Celsius, a dangerous threshold.

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What is a great-grandmother to do? I was already active on climate issues as co-chair of a group called GASP (Grand (m)others Act to Save the Planet), so I was aware that the Shells and Exxon Mobils of the world were causing immense harm. But Canadian banks?

GASP members decided we absolutely could not stay silent. We proceeded with letters to bank CEOs and their boards late last summer, followed by hundreds of postcards, emails and phone calls later in the fall.

In mid-November, TD announced a new “[climate action plan](#)” pledging to achieve “net-zero” greenhouse gas emissions associated with both its banking operations and investment activities by 2050. It was the first signal that one of the Big Five was responding more seriously to customer and shareholder concerns about the bank’s role in accelerating climate change.

RBC unveiled its own “climate strategy” in mid-February, soon followed by BMO and Scotiabank. All except CIBC are promising [net-zero emissions by 2050](#), but not one has yet pledged short-and medium-term targets to align with the Paris Climate goal of keeping global warming under 1.5 C.

RBC’s annual general meeting was on April 8 and with it, a hint of real action on climate. A shareholder proposal asked the bank “to adopt companywide, quantitative, time-bound targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.” Though a record number of shareholders — over 30 per cent — voted in favour of the resolution, down it went. Deep disappointment.

The transition to net-zero “is creating the greatest commercial opportunity of our age,” says Mark Carney, but how fast we get there is even more critical. Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg stresses the urgency: “We shouldn’t be focused on dates 10, 20 or even 30 years in the future. If we don’t reduce our emissions now, then those distant targets won’t mean anything because our carbon budgets will be long gone.”

So, this Earth Day, tell your bank you want action now on climate, and it must put in place short- and mid-term targets to give their climate promises teeth. Then, if there’s insufficient action, pledge that on Earth Day 2022, you will move your money to a financial institution that doesn’t play Russian roulette with our grandchildren’s lives.

I am not waiting. I have recently opened an account at a credit union and started moving my accounts away from RBC.

Lorraine Green is co-chair of [GASP](#) (Grand (m)others Act to Save the Planet). You can connect with her on Twitter, [@lorraineagreen](#) or through www.GASP4change.org.