

Chapter Three:

The Public Relations Apparatus Supporting the Climate Litigation Campaign

As previous chapters showed, the climate litigation campaign is supported by a well-heeled and highly coordinated network of funders, lawyers and advocates. This chapter looks at that network’s public affairs operation, detailing the organizations and media outlets that comprise the public relations arm of the campaign. Some organizations have been involved since before the 2012 La Jolla conference, though this complex web of groups continues to expand. As their campaign tactics evolve, activists are attempting to normalize for political leaders and the public the idea that suing energy manufacturers is an appropriate response to climate change.

The Nonprofit Organizations Coordinating the Climate Liability Narrative

“The public relations arm of the climate liability campaign consists of organizations, public relations firms and ‘media’ outlets that are highly coordinated and utilize the same talking points. It is not, as they want it to appear, an organic collaboration of interested parties.”

The initial champions of climate liability—the Climate Accountability Institute (CAI) and the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)—have been advancing litigation and an anti-energy agenda for years, coalescing the movement ahead of the 2012 conference in La Jolla, and seeding other organizations with strategists and money.

CAI was founded in 2011 by climate attribution scientist Richard Heede and Harvard University professor Naomi Oreskes with the stated goal of targeting energy manufacturers as being responsible for climate change.¹ Rather than focus on the countries, regulations and activities that lead to climate change, they wanted to shift the dialogue to blame the companies that manufactured and sold the energy that the world was demanding.² In 2012, CAI partnered with the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) to convene the La

The Foundations Funding Climate Accountability Institute	
Wallace Global Fund	\$120,000 2013–2016 ⁱ
.....	
Rockefeller Brothers Fund	\$207,000 2014–2019 ⁱⁱ
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The Foundations Funding Center for International Environmental Law	
Wallace Global Fund	\$215,000 2013–2016 ⁱⁱⁱ
.....	
Oak Foundation	\$1,000,000 2014–Feb. 2016 ^{iv}
.....	
MacArthur Foundation	\$2,125,000 1991–2006 ^v
.....	
Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors	\$25,000 2017 ^{vi}

Jolla conference, introducing this idea to like-minded organizations and individuals across the country.³

At the conference, attendees established that they would need “credible peer-reviewed research” to bolster their attacks against

energy manufacturers.⁴ Heede spearheaded this effort, compiling the Carbon Majors Database, which attempts to quantify and trace historic and cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide and methane from fuel and cement producers rather than by region or activity.⁵ He also partnered with Oreskes and Peter Frumhoff—the director of science and policy for UCS who sits on the CAI Council of Advisors—to write a series of articles advancing this attribution theory with respect to specific energy manufacturers, with the intention of demonstrating liability for climate change.^{6,7,8,9}

CIEL was co-founded in 1989 by Durwood Zaelke, president of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development (IGSD), and James Cameron, fellow at the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy.^{10,11,12} Zaelke’s IGSD is actively pressuring cities to file litigation against manufacturers, and as discussed in the last chapter, academics at Yale have produced significant research for climate litigation.^{13,14,15} CIEL is currently led by Carroll Muffett, who is one of three CAI Board Members along with Heede.¹⁶ Muffett is a vocal supporter of the climate liability campaign and attended the Rockefeller Family Fund strategy session in 2016.^{17,18}

CIEL also has close relationships with lawyers pursuing climate litigation. Matt Pawa, the lead plaintiffs attorney for the first round of climate lawsuits filed in the early 2000s, as well as the current cases brought by New York City and King County, has served on CIEL’s Board of Trustees for years.¹⁹ He is joined on the board by Katie Redford, the director of EarthRights International (ERI), which represents the City and County of Boulder and San Miguel County in their climate liability lawsuit. Sharon Eubanks, the former lead counsel on the RICO case against tobacco companies who attended the 2012 conference in La Jolla and the 2016 Rockefeller meeting, is also a board member.^{20,21,22}

CIEL has significantly increased its efforts to bolster climate litigation since 2015, releasing five reports specifically about climate liability. For example, in 2017, the organization authored a report titled “Smoke and Fumes: The Legal and Evidentiary Basis for Holding Big Oil Accountable for the Climate Crisis,” which claimed to summarize what energy manufacturers knew about climate change and how they allegedly “misled investors and the public about climate science.”^{23,24} The organization also extensively blogs about the lawsuits, seeking to amplify the visibility of the litigation in the public domain.²⁵

“ Thus, the Climate Accountability Institute (CAI) and the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) have served as central organizers of the research, lawyers and activists that publicly support the litigation campaign.”

The Big 4 – How Four Organizations Magnify the Climate Liability Campaign

Four organizations, in particular, have taken an aggressive public role to advance the climate liability campaign: Greenpeace, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), 350.org and the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development (IGSD). To this day, they continue to be the most active organizations promoting litigation against energy manufacturers. These organizations provide research, create public relations and social media campaigns and offer themselves as prominent voices and third-party validators.

GREENPEACE

Greenpeace was an early promoter of assigning liability for climate change to energy manufacturers. As Chapter Two outlines, the organization spearheaded several anti-energy projects in the early 2000s including the PolluterWatch database and Exxon-Secrets.^{26,27,28} Greenpeace has since continued its dedication to the climate liability movement, sending representatives to both the 2012 La Jolla conference and the 2016 Rockefeller strategy session.^{29,30}

The Foundations Funding Greenpeace	
Wallace Global Fund	\$125,000 2013–2016 ^{vii}
Hewlett Foundation	\$1,150,000 2014 ^{viii}
Oak Foundation	\$900,000 2017 ^{ix}
Rockefeller Brothers Fund	\$495,000 2003–2018 ^x

In 2017, Greenpeace provided seemingly independent support for the litigation, releasing a statement praising Oakland and San Francisco for filing a lawsuit against five energy manufacturers.³¹ In 2018, the organization publicly commended Rhode Island for filing its lawsuit, reinforcing their support for targeting energy *producers*, rather than users, for climate change litigation.³² These statements were released by Greenpeace’s Naomi Ages.

Ages, a lawyer and former legal extern for the Environmental Defense Fund, serves as a senior political strategist and public spokesperson for Greenpeace's climate liability activism.³³ In 2015, Ages participated in a panel at the COP 21 climate conference in Paris with UCS president Ken Kimmell, Matt Pawa, Carroll Muffett and Columbia University's Michael Gerrard. The panel promoted bringing racketeering charges against energy manufacturers over climate change.³⁴ Shortly thereafter, she attended the 2016 strategy session at the Rockefeller Family Fund headquarters.³⁵ She now regularly provides commentary and op-eds to publicly validate the liability campaign.³⁶

Greenpeace is also promoting the climate liability campaign internationally. In 2017, it held a press conference at the United Nations in Germany called "Climate litigation—how major polluters are now facing court."³⁷ The organization's international counterparts in Canada and Southeast Asia have also petitioned local officials to investigate energy manufacturers and consider legal action.^{38,39}

THE UNION OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS (UCS)

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UCS has been a primary actor facilitating climate litigation. In 2007, it published "Smoke, Mirrors and Hot Air: How ExxonMobil Uses Big Tobacco's Tactics to Manufacture Uncertainty on Climate Science," which alleged that the company had worked to "sow doubt" about climate change.⁴⁰ Since then, UCS helped organize the La Jolla conference, has hosted numerous events promoting the litigation and has met with public officials behind closed doors to encourage them to sue.

For example, on March 29, 2016, UCS's Peter Frumhoff joined Matt Pawa to brief state attorneys general, urging them to sue energy manufacturers over climate change.⁴¹ After this meeting, former Vice President Al Gore, then-New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and several other state attorneys general hosted a press conference saying they would push for aggressive action against energy companies, including investigating their climate disclosures.⁴² Frumhoff also joined his UCS colleague Kathy Mulvey at a Capitol Hill forum titled, "Oil Is the New Tobacco," where Mulvey explained UCS's frequent meetings with state attorneys general in an effort to generate more of these lawsuits:

"UCS has also been involved in providing information to attorneys general who are moving into the issue on whether these companies violated any state laws in providing this information to shareholders

The Foundations Funding Union of Concerned Scientists

Wallace Global Fund	\$225,000 2013–2016 ^{xi}
Hewlett Foundation	\$7,730,000 2002–2018 ^{xii}
Oak Foundation	\$1,100,000 2005–2008 ^{xiii}
Rockefeller Brothers Fund	\$75,000 2005–2009 ^{xiv}
Tides	\$135,726 2014–2017 ^{xv}
MacArthur Foundation	\$9,981,040 1990–2018 ^{xvi}
Energy Foundation	\$7,500,750 2010–2016 ^{xvii}

and the public... Our chief scientist Peter Frumhoff who's actually here with me as well and he has briefed a number of the AGs and he co-convened a session with the Harvard law school back in April."⁴³

UCS also amplifies the litigation campaign on public platforms. It has a webpage detailing the many actions it has taken to support various climate lawsuits over the years.⁴⁴ In addition, the organization releases statements of support after each climate lawsuit is filed, which helps provide public cover for the litigation and advances the campaign's messaging in the media from a seemingly independent voice.⁴⁵

Recently, UCS commissioned a study through academics at Yale University—which, as discussed in Chapter Two, has a history of providing various levels of support for climate litigation—suggesting that energy manufacturers should pay for climate change's effects and amplifying the messaging touted by the climate litigation movement.^{46,47}

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350.org, which previously supported divestment from fossil fuel companies, turned its attention to the climate liability campaign in 2015 after the Climate Accountability Institute released Rick Heede’s “Carbon Majors Database” project.⁴⁸ That year, 350.org also released a letter calling on the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate ExxonMobil, citing the *Los Angeles Times* and Inside-Climate News “Exxon Knew” series. This letter was co-signed by a number of individuals including the president of UCS, the executive director of Greenpeace USA, and billionaire environmental funder Tom Steyer.⁴⁹ 350.org was now in the club.

The Foundations Funding 350.org

Wallace Global Fund	\$380,000	2013–2016 ^{xviii}
Oak Foundation	\$3,998,934	2011–2017 ^{xix}
Rockefeller Brothers Fund	\$1,350,000	2012–2017 ^{xx}
Tides	\$653,874	2012–2017 ^{xxi}
Rockefeller Family Fund	\$125,000	2013 ^{xxii}

Shortly thereafter, 350.org’s co-founders Bill McKibben and Jamie Henn attended the 2016 Rockefeller strategy session in New York City, which focused on tactics to “delegitimize” energy manufac-

turers.⁵⁰ This included developing a social media and messaging campaign across the network of allied organizations.⁵¹ Two months later, 350.org launched the #ExxonKnew website and Twitter handle, turning the climate liability movement Twitter hashtag into a full-blown public relations campaign.^{52,53}

The “Exxon Knew” campaign’s website provides resources for activists, a petition for the Department of Justice and state attorneys general to investigate, and information about campaigns in different states.⁵⁴ The campaign website now lists UCS, the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), Greenpeace USA, the Conservation Law Foundation and EarthRights International (ERI) among its closest partners.

Both McKibben and Henn have become vocal supporters of climate litigation. They frequently write op-eds and tweets supporting the investigations into, and lawsuits against, energy manufacturers.^{55,56,57,58} McKibben isn’t shy about his disdain for the industry, calling energy manufacturers “big trouble” and the “zombie that won’t die.”^{59,60} In January 2018, McKibben joined Greenpeace’s Naomi Ages at New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s press conference announcing that he was suing major fossil fuel producers over climate change.⁶¹

350.org also hosts numerous events in support of these legal efforts. For example, in December 2015, the group hosted the “Public Trial of ExxonMobil” at the COP 21 conference in Paris.⁶² Since then, they’ve hosted a number of gatherings with their closest allies, including Greenpeace USA, UCS, and, more recently, the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development’s Center for Climate Integrity.^{63,64,65,66} 350.org is now squarely entrenched as a leader in the climate liability campaign.

THE INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (IGSD)

Of the “Big 4” organizations, IGSD is the most recent to join the climate liability campaign. Founded by CIEL co-founder Durwood Zaelke, IGSD has created a sophisticated public relations campaign, complete with academic research, a podcast, promotional events and a prominent social media presence.

IGSD launched this public relations campaign in August 2017 through the Center for Climate Integrity (CCI).⁶⁷ CCI is run by Richard Wiles, who served as Kert Davies’ research partner at the Environmental Working Group during the 1990s. Kert Davies is the former research director for Greenpeace and the chief architect of a number of initiatives to gather internal company documents from energy manufacturers. While CCI does not disclose its full list of funders, the initiative is funded in part by a \$7 million grant from the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, which has been described by the *New York Times* as an, “activist fund in Europe long before activism became a popular strategy.”^{68,69,70}

CCI’s sole mission is to support climate liability lawsuits against energy manufacturers.⁷¹ According to its website, CCI provides “campaign infrastructure, resources, and strategic direction” for activists promoting the concept of forcing manufacturers to pay for climate change.⁷²

“CCI provides ‘campaign infrastructure, resources, and strategic direction’ for activists promoting the concept of forcing manufacturers to pay for climate change.”

In January 2018, the organization launched “Pay Up Climate Polluters,” a public relations campaign that encourages cities across the country to file climate lawsuits against energy manufacturers.⁷³ Their website has campaign pages dedicated to states like New York, California and Florida, and provides information on each of the climate liability lawsuits across the country. CCI purchased billboards in Miami, pressuring the city to file a lawsuit against energy manufacturers, and coordinated the lobbying effort urging the city of Fort Lauderdale to take legal action.^{74,75}

The Foundations Funding The Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development (IGSD)

Hewlett Foundation \$1,650,000
2007–2017^{xxiii}

Rockefeller Brothers Fund \$1,940,000
2004–2017^{xxiv}

CCI also submitted an amicus brief in support of the lawsuits filed by Sher Edling on behalf of California municipalities. Co-signers of the brief included academics highlighted in Chapter Two including Naomi Oreskes, Geoffrey Supran and Justin Farrell, as well as the organization’s beneficiary, Ben Franta.^{76,77}

CCI also hosts events across the country to promote climate lawsuits. In April 2019, CCI co-hosted an event with UCS titled, “Holding Fossil Fuel Companies Liable for the Climate Change Harms in Colorado” at the University of Colorado School of Law. The panel included David Bookbinder of the Niskanen Center and Marco Simons of ERI, the attorneys representing the Colorado communities in their climate lawsuit.⁷⁸ Just one week later, CCI hosted a climate litigation event at the University of Hawai’i School of Law with two other lawyers profiled in Chapters One and Two: Vic Sher, lead plaintiffs’ attorney at Sher Edling, and Ann Carlson, a UCLA professor and consultant for Sher Edling.^{79,80,81} Although these events were held at law schools, they were one-sided affairs, with no panelists to represent any alternative viewpoints.

Recently, CCI released a report and corresponding website that attempts to calculate the cost of sea level rise adaptation for dozens of communities across the U.S., while also demanding that energy manufacturers pay those costs.^{82,83} According to Wiles, the

Rockefeller Family Foundation and MacArthur Foundation funded the study; Wiles’ former employer, Climate Central, calculated the report projections.^{84,85,86}

In 2018, IGSD provided a grant to launch another public relations endeavor, a Wiles-produced podcast called *Drilled*.^{87,88} Hosted by Amy Westervelt, a freelance journalist who covers climate liability lawsuits, the podcast promotes the narrative that energy manufacturers should be made to pay for climate change.^{89,90} Among the guests to appear on *Drilled* include Oreskes, Supran, Davies, Carlson and Simons.

Covering Climate Litigation

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InsideClimate News (ICN) and Climate Liability News (CLN) provide sustained coverage of the climate liability campaign. These organizations, along with *Drilled*, are interconnected; they share many of the same editors, writers and funders. For example, *Drilled*’s Westervelt is a contributing author for CLN and wrote an ICN profile promoting Pawa’s climate litigation efforts.^{91,92}

ICN was created in 2007 by a seed grant from Michael Northrup—the director of the Sustainable Development grantmaking program at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). It is also led by David Sassoon, a former consultant to the RBF.^{93,94} *National Review* suggests that ICN has its roots in a PR consultancy established by Sassoon called Science First Communications.

According to *National Review*:

“Links between the two entities abound. The nonprofit news organization *InsideClimate News* and the PR consultancy Science First are frequently mentioned together in public records, listed as though they are interchangeable. And by at least one credible account, Science First serves as the official publisher of *InsideClimate News*.”⁹⁵

National Review’s examination of relevant tax filings shows ICN is funded by many of the same environmental foundations detailed in Chapter Two.

For example, the RBF and Rockefeller Family Fund sponsored the ICN series that prompted the “Exxon Knew” campaign in 2015: *Exxon: The Road Not Taken*.^{96,97} This series was inspired by Michael MacCracken, a scientist with the Climate Accountability Institute and a La Jolla conference attendee.⁹⁸ 350.org, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), and other allies then leveraged this piece, calling on state attorneys general to investigate the company.⁹⁹

The Foundations Funding InsideClimate News

Wallace Global Fund \$60,000
2013–2016^{xxv}

Rockefeller
Brothers Fund \$1,400,000
2013–2018^{xxvi, xxvii}

Energy Foundation \$250,000
2015^{xxviii}

Rockefeller
Family Fund Unknown^{xxix}

In response to the series, California Rep. Ted Lieu circulated a letter, signed by 44 congressional members, which cited UCS and “investigations by the *Los Angeles Times* and InsideClimate News,” accusing energy companies of suppressing climate science.¹⁰⁰ The New York Attorney General’s office also cited ICN’s reporting when it subpoenaed ExxonMobil’s records.¹⁰¹

In 2017, the network of climate liability activists created CLN, which is solely dedicated to covering climate lawsuits and investigations.¹⁰² CLN provides a platform for allied activists like Bill McKibben and Peter Frumhoff to voice their support for the litigation.^{103,104}

CLN, unlike ICN, has no pretense of impartiality. The organization is led by CCI Director, Richard Wiles; Climate Investigations Center Director, Kert Davies; and Alyssa Johl, who simultaneously serves as legal counsel for CCI and a consultant for Greenpeace, and formerly served as the senior attorney for climate and energy at the Center for International Environmental Law.^{105,106} Further cementing this close-knit network, CLN hired Lynn Zinser as its founding editor. Zinser formerly served as a senior editor for ICN.¹⁰⁷

The Public Relations Professionals Amplifying the Climate Liability Campaign

The climate liability campaign is also receiving assistance from public relations firms well-connected into this same network. These firms provide strategic counsel and message coordination across the nonprofit organizations and law firms supporting the litigation campaign.

Resource Media is the main public relations firm helping Sher Edling amplify its lawsuits. The firm is listed as the press contact

on press releases issued by Sher Edling that announce municipal climate lawsuits.¹⁰⁸ Sher Edling also listed John Lamson, then-executive vice president for Resource Media, as a press contact for a letter sent to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission on behalf of several municipalities.¹⁰⁹ Recently, Lamson left Resource Media to become Sher Edling’s director of media relations.¹¹⁰

Sher Edling isn’t shy about how it uses public relations firms. During a November 2017 presentation, Vic Sher explained he uses public relations firms to generate validators for his litigation that are seemingly independent of each other when, in fact, they are coordinated through the public relations firms:

“If you look at the media rollout for the cases that we’ve filed so far, it’s been amazing, it’s been terrific. Stories in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, scholarly pieces commenting on the strength of this case compared to the past cases. And I will tell you that while we didn’t write any of those stories it’s not just by happenstance, and a lot of work goes into it by very smart people.”¹¹¹

The Foundations Funding Resource Media

Hewlett Foundation \$615,000
2012–2014^{xxx}

Tides \$70,000
2014–2016^{xxxi}

Rockefeller
Brothers Fund \$1,100,000
2006–2017^{xxxii}

Tides \$49,800
2015^{xxxiii}

Rockefeller
Family Fund \$35,000
2013^{xxxiv}

Energy Foundation \$1,904,000
2014–2019^{xxxv}

Climate Nexus is another public relations arm of the litigation campaign. The organization was founded in 2011 as a sponsored project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and “provides organizational support like strong governance, legal counsel, grants management, accounting, reporting, HR and finance” to anti-energy efforts.¹¹² The organization is helping the climate liability campaign by amplifying messaging against energy manufacturers.

Climate Nexus Director of Strategic Communications Hunter Cutting previously built the energy and climate division of Resource Media.¹¹³ Cutting has a history of bias against energy manufacturers; he rebuffed a *New York Times Magazine* feature for its reluctance to blame energy manufacturers for climate change and frequently tweets to criticize the manufacturing community.^{114,115}

The Foundations Funding Climate Nexus	
MacArthur Foundation	\$20,000,000 2016–2019 ^{xxxvi}
Tides	\$300,000 2016 ^{xxxvii}
Energy Foundation	\$1,725,000 2014–2016 ^{xxxviii}
Rockefeller Brothers Fund	\$1,585,000 2012–2017 ^{xxxix}

Before releasing one of its anti-energy articles in the 2015, InsideClimate News publisher David Sassoon emailed an embargoed copy to Climate Nexus staff.¹¹⁶ Phillip Newell, senior manager for Climate Nexus, promptly coordinated with the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), offering to help it leverage this release to support the litigation:

“You’re in luck because tonight/tomorrow InsideClimate News is publishing the latest in its series about Exxon’s research on climate. This one will focus on the legal liability and duty to disclose risk to shareholders, which should be a perfect news hook for you to use if any of you are interested in penning an oped (which I’d be happy to help you with).”¹¹⁷

M+R is a third public relations firm supporting the activist organizations and legal teams involved in the climate litigation campaign. The firm was founded in 1991 by Donald K. Ross, former director

of the Rockefeller Family Fund (RFF), as an offshoot of the law firm Malkin & Ross.^{118,119} Ross served as CEO of M+R from 2001–2010, while simultaneously chairing Greenpeace’s Board of Directors, where Kert Davies was serving as Director of Research.¹²⁰

According to the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works report on the funders of climate litigation detailed in Chapter Two, Ross encouraged the funders to craft “a task force approach” to allocating its resources.^{121,122} As he explained, “funders can play a role in using money to drive, to create, ad hoc efforts, in many cases that will have a litigation component coming from one group, a lobbying component coming from another group, a grass roots component organizing component from yet a third group with a structure that enables them to function well.”¹²³ This is exactly what was done.

M+R acts as a lynchpin between the offshoots of the climate litigation campaign. It managed the public relations around Naomi Oreskes and Geoffrey Supran’s paper, and spearheaded communications for the Center for Climate Integrity’s (CCI) “Pay Up Climate Polluters” campaign.^{124,125} In fact, it now works with many groups covered in this report: EarthRights International (ERI), UCS, CCI, Greenpeace, 350.org, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, RFF and the MacArthur Foundation.^{126,127,128}

“ The public relations firm M+R acts as a lynchpin between the offshoots of the climate litigation campaign.”

M+R also uses the same staffers for this work in order to ensure coordination among these groups. Kyle Moler, senior strategist in M+R’s Washington D.C. office, is the point of contact for CCI’s Pay Up Climate Polluters campaign and on the press release for Oreskes and Supran’s paper.^{129,130} Moler’s other clients include 350.org, Greenpeace and UCS.¹³¹ His colleague, Kyle Grootzinger, helps to manage ERI’s communications around the Boulder lawsuit and was the press contact for the aforementioned University of Hawai’i event featuring CCI, Sher Edling and UCLA’s Ann Carlson.^{132,133}

Conclusion

Although efforts to pursue litigation against energy manufacturers span different law firms, states and legal arguments, each is being supported by a highly coordinated group of organizations. These organizations share the same major funders and rely on the same coordinated and tight-knit group of individuals. The appearance of any grassroots support and/or outside validators for climate litigation is not “just by happenstance,” to quote Vic Sher; rather, it is highly orchestrated.

Endnotes

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- ²⁷ “PolluterWatch,” <https://polluterwatch.org/>.
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