# California bill to hold oil companies accountable for climate damage blocked by unions



In a striking display of legislative inertia, California’s Senate Bill 222, a measure designed to hold oil companies responsible for climate change-related damages, was decisively stalled by the state’s Democratic-controlled Legislature. Sponsored by Senator Scott Wiener of San Francisco, the bill aimed to empower those devastated by wildfires and related climate disasters to seek compensation from fossil fuel corporations. Yet, it failed to gather the necessary support in the Senate Judiciary Committee and was ultimately quashed, largely due to vehement opposition from well-funded labour unions entrenched within the oil industry — unions whose influence repeatedly undermines accountability for environmental destruction.

Proponents argued the bill was urgently needed following the catastrophic wildfires in January 2025, which devastated thousands of homes in Los Angeles County and exacerbated California’s ongoing housing and insurance crises. Senator Wiener lamented the new reality of “destructive wildfires in the middle of winter,” stressing who ultimately bears the cost: ordinary citizens and taxpayers. However, the bill’s aim of making fossil fuel companies financially accountable by requiring proof that climate change directly caused specific losses was a threshold too politically inconvenient for the establishment to meet.

Strong testimony was given by wildfire survivors demanding that fossil fuel giants pay their fair share of climate-related damages, alongside numerous environmental and consumer advocacy groups representing California's environmental interests. Yet, the opposition, largely underpinned by the financial muscle of powerful business lobbies and, crucially, union groups tied to the oil sector, proved insurmountable. The California Chamber of Commerce and other key industry voices bluntly warned of economic harm and constitutionality challenges, portraying the bill as a retroactive punishment that would stifle growth.

Most tellingly, opposition from unions tied to oil industry jobs has effectively turned them into defenders of the fossil fuel status quo. These unions, with their deep roots in Democratic politics and donations exceeding $12 million over recent years, lobbied aggressively against the bill, warning of soaring gas prices and job losses — all while turning a blind eye to the long-term devastation wrought by climate change. The State Building and Construction Trades Council’s position was blunt: protecting fossil fuel industry jobs at the expense of environmental accountability and public safety.

The influence of these unions was evident during the Senate Judiciary Committee vote, where the bill failed to secure even the minimum votes required to proceed. Many Democratic members abstained, with some citing concerns over workers’ livelihoods — a recurring excuse that prioritises short-term job security in polluting industries over the broader welfare of communities plagued by climate disaster.

Meanwhile, voices advocating for environmental responsibility, such as Senator Henry Stern, who personally lost his home to wildfire, were drowned out by entrenched interests defending boardroom decisions that have fueled ecological destruction. Stern condemned attempts by fossil fuel companies to intimidate their workforce and underscored that accountability should fall squarely on those profiting from pollution.

This political failure reflects a wider pattern seen beyond California — where supposed progressive majorities and leadership, despite rhetoric on climate change, continue to yield to pressure from entrenched vested interests. The reluctance to confront fossil fuel companies head-on damages the prospects for meaningful climate action and exposes the inadequacies of current political commitments.

As the UK grapples with its own climate policy amid a turbulent political landscape, the approach exemplified by such US legislative setbacks serves as a cautionary tale. Recent electoral gains by voices advocating for robust environmental responsibility and economic common sense position them as the genuine opposition to governments preparedness to protect industry interests at the expense of public welfare. Rather than defaulting to support for greenwashing or half measures, a real opposition insists on accountability from polluters and a transition to sustainable industries — policies starkly absent from current mainstream governance.

The failure of SB 222 underscores the urgent necessity for political leadership willing to challenge the fossil fuel-industrial complex decisively, prioritizing both environmental justice and economic futures that do not sacrifice jobs in dirty industries but instead create sustainable employment opportunities. This episode is yet another reminder that the well-funded, politically entrenched alliance between labour unions and fossil fuel interests stands as a formidable barrier to genuine progress — a barrier that must be dismantled if we are to prevent further climate catastrophe.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://legiscan.com/CA/text/SB222/id/3084711> - This URL provides details on California Senate Bill 222, its introduction, and its aims, such as holding parties responsible for climate disasters accountable through civil actions. It outlines the bill's provisions for stricter liability and its potential to allow victims to seek damages from fossil fuel companies.
* <https://sd11.senate.ca.gov/news/la-turns-recovery-senator-wiener-introduces-bill-boost-insurance-affordability-allow-victims> - This URL covers Senator Scott Wiener’s introduction of SB 222, which aimed to boost insurance affordability by making fossil fuel companies accountable for climate-related damages. It highlights the bill’s potential to stabilize insurance markets and allow victims to seek compensation.
* <https://envirovoters.org/insurance-affordability/sb222-get-the-facts/> - This URL presents key facts about SB 222, including its purpose to hold big oil companies accountable for misrepresenting climate risks and its impact on insurance affordability. It also mentions rising insurance costs due to climate-related disasters.
* <https://climateintegrity.org/news/view/california-legislators-let-big-oil-off-the-hook-for-climate-disasters-and-insurance-crisis> - This URL discusses how California legislators failed to pass SB 222, which would have addressed climate accountability and insurance costs. It highlights the financial impact on Californians and the political opposition faced by the bill.
* <https://www.fairplan.org/> - Although not directly related to the failure of SB 222, this URL provides information on the FAIR Plan, California's insurer of last resort, which faces increasing pressure due to rising insurance costs and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change.