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OPINION: Carbon capture hurts Texas communities and taxpayers

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A new report released this week underscores what many Texans already know: the growing carbon capture industry puts communities and groundwater at risk and isn't even viable without massive tax breaks and subsidies from the federal government.

Earlier this month, the Environmental Protection Agency moved ahead with the first permits for Occidental Petroleum to store captured carbon thousands of feet under Texas soil, supposedly permanently. Texans should be wary of oil and gas companies that profit the most from causing climate change offering the silver bullet to stop it.

Independent researchers studied carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) projects in Texas to explore the extent of the government's role in expediting the deployment of the projects.

We now know that CCS is completely dependent on government tax credits and subsidies, rendering these projects nothing more than a taxpayer-subsidized effort that financially benefits the fossil fuel sector. In fact, public funding and tax breaks are the largest sources of revenue for these CCS projects. Researchers computed estimated tax credits for 34 Texas projects, and they stand to receive a minimum of \$3.2 billion in annual tax credits, and up to a maximum of \$33 billion per year.

But the problems for Texans don't stop with the tax and subsidies windfalls for CCS.

Community members living in places with proposed federally funded CCS projects will soon be asked to negotiate "benefits" from the projects directly with project developers, as a part of legally binding Community Benefits Agreements or CBAs. The inherent power imbalance between multinational corporations launching CCS projects and the fenceline community members who these projects will impact calls into question whether the resulting community benefits agreements can result in true health, economic, and quality of life benefits. Much more must be done to create CBA processes and to equip community members to sit equitably at the CBA negotiation table.

Meanwhile, our state oil and gas agency, the Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC), wants to take over permitting and oversight authority of long-term CO₂ injection wells from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). But the Railroad Commission has a poor track record of accountability. This week's stunning and dangerous pipeline fire in Houston, as well as the recent revelation of leaks from a carbon capture plant in Illinois that is potentially impacting a critical aquifer, are more signs that we cannot trust this industry, nor the regulators in its pockets, to police themselves and still safeguard communities.

(Editor's note: The EPA said on Sept. 19 – after this op-ed was submitted – it found no evidence of a threat to drinking water from the carbon capture plant in Illinois.)

Researchers also revealed that local schools and governments in Texas are being or will be indirectly financed by CCS tax credits, making them financially dependent on the fossil fuel industry for decades to come. The research calculated this tax regime costs Texans approximately \$1 billion. And the average cost per job from the industry amounts to \$1.2 million (with a range of \$31,000 to \$39,000,000 per job).

All of these adverse impacts on Texans are exacerbated by the fact CCS just doesn't work as a climate change mitigation technology. In fact, 13 of the 15 operational CCS projects in the U.S. are used to produce even more oil and gas, while they capture less than 1% of their carbon emissions. International experts agree carbon capture is one of the least-effective, most-expensive climate change mitigation options. In fact, "[carbon capture and storage] has a history of failed and abandoned projects dating back more than half a century."

In the end, carbon capture and storage amounts to nothing more than another generational giveaway to the oil and gas industry. And tying the future of Texas schools and students to the failures of the oil and industry only perpetuates this injustice. Texas families deserve

real climate solutions—not more giveaways to the oil and gas industry.

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