



Walmart's Assault on the Climate

The Truth Behind One of the Biggest Climate
Polluters and Slickest Greenwashers in America

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Introduction

In 2005, facing a sea of bad headlines, widespread opposition to its new stores, and a plummeting stock price, Walmart announced that it would transform itself into a leader on environmental sustainability. “Environmental loss threatens our health and the health of the natural systems we depend on,” said then-CEO Lee Scott in a speech unveiling the company’s new initiative. “As one of the largest companies in the world, with an expanding global presence, environmental problems are OUR problems.”¹

Scott acknowledged the gravity of climate change and the urgent imperative to reduce greenhouse gas pollution to avoid catastrophic impacts. “The science is in and it is overwhelming,” he said. “We believe every company has a responsibility to reduce greenhouse gases as quickly as it can.”²

In the eight years since Scott’s speech, Walmart has issued a steady stream of announcements about its efforts to improve energy efficiency, reduce waste, and expand renewable power. These activities have transformed the media narrative about Walmart and contributed to a significant shift in the company’s public image.³

But a close examination of Walmart’s operations reveals that the company has not in fact become an environmental leader or made a sincere and significant effort to cut its climate pollution:

- Nearly a decade after Scott warned of the dangers of climate change, Walmart’s greenhouse gas emissions have grown substantially and are continuing to rise.
- Walmart lags its peers in making the shift to renewable power, its progress hamstrung by an unwillingness to accept a very modest reduction in profits for more investment in solar and wind systems.
- In measuring its climate pollution, Walmart omits several major sources of greenhouse gas emissions in its operations, including those generated by its massive international shipping operations and its land development practices.

- Walmart claims to be cutting emissions in its supply chain, but the retailer has a dismal track record when it comes to being truthful and accountable for conditions in the factories that supply its stores.
- Perhaps most concerning, Walmart is a major contributor to the campaigns of politicians who oppose action on the climate crisis, helping to ensure that the U.S. does not take the steps necessary to avert the worst impacts of global warming.

If Walmart were included in the Greenhouse 100 Polluters Index, a list that is limited to heavy industrial firms, such as oil companies and power plants, the retailer would take the 33rd spot, just a hair behind Chevron.

Today Walmart ranks as one of the biggest and fastest growing climate polluters in the country. If it were included in the Greenhouse 100 Polluters Index, a list that is limited to heavy industrial firms, such as oil companies and power plants, Walmart would take the 33rd spot, just a hair behind Chevron, America’s second largest oil company.⁴

Walmart's Climate Emissions are Rising

Despite its 2005 declaration about the responsibility companies have to reduce their climate change pollution, Walmart has not cut its emissions. In fact, its greenhouse gas emissions have risen over the last eight years, even as the company orchestrated a steady stream of publicity boasting of its solar installations and efficiency measures.

Since 2005, Walmart's reported greenhouse gas emissions have risen 14 percent, reaching 21 million metric tons per year, according to data the company has filed with CDP, formerly known as the Carbon Disclosure Project.⁵ What's more, this figure only accounts for a fraction of the company's total emissions, as Walmart does not include large segments of its greenhouse gas pollution in these disclosures (more on this below).

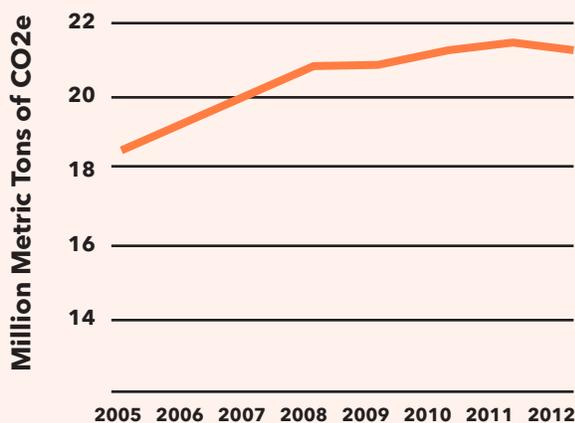
In 2012, Walmart did report a modest 1.3 percent reduction in emissions, but this decline was not exceptional. It was exactly in line with the rest of the retail industry, as well as the U.S. economy overall, which saw greenhouse gas emissions drop last year, due in part to milder weather.

Walmart's greenhouse gas emissions have risen over the last eight years, even as it orchestrated a steady stream of publicity boasting of its solar installations and efficiency measures.

Another way to evaluate Walmart's professed leadership on climate is to look at its greenhouse gas emissions intensity – the volume of pollution it produces per \$1 million in sales. Walmart's emissions intensity – 45 metric tons of CO₂e per \$1 million in sales – is higher than that of competing chains, including Costco (16 metric tons) and Target (42 metric tons). Costco's emissions intensity is only about one-third of Walmart's, in part because Costco's high-wage workforce generates more sales per square foot and therefore uses less energy to produce the same revenue.⁶

Not only has Walmart failed to reduce its climate pollution, but earlier this year, the company indicated that it will continue to increase the amount of carbon dioxide it is pumping into the atmosphere through 2020 and beyond.⁷

Walmart's Global CO₂ Emissions from Selected Sources*



Source: Walmart's filings with the CDP.
Notes: Walmart reports emissions from its stores, distribution centers, and trucks, but does not report emissions from other sources, such as international shipping, land development, store construction, and manufacturing of store-brand products.

Walmart Lags Other Retailers In Making the Shift to Renewable Power

Walmart often touts the size of its efficiency and renewable power projects, but these investments are far too small relative to the company's size and its growth trajectory. In fact, Walmart lags its peers on making the shift to renewable power. The company derives only 4 percent of the electricity used to power its stores from its wind and solar projects.⁸ Walmart's sheer size means it uses enough renewable energy to land a place on the EPA's list of top 20 retail users of green power, but almost all of the other retailers on this list derive a larger share of their energy from renewables.⁹ Some, like Kohl's and Staples, get all of their electricity from renewable sources. Others, like McDonald's (30 percent) and Starbucks (70 percent), are way ahead of Walmart.

Walmart lags its peers on making the shift to renewable power. It derives only 4 percent of the electricity used to power its stores from its wind and solar projects. Its use of renewable power actually declined in last year.

Many small businesses, too, are out-pacing the world's biggest retailer. Nuu-Muu, a women's clothing store that has installed solar rooftop panels, is one of more than two dozen independent businesses in Bellingham, Washington, that have, for example, transitioned to 100 percent renewable power.¹⁰

One telling fact about Walmart's commitment to green energy is that its use of renewable power actually declined in last year. In its *2013 Global Responsibility Report*, the company explains that it was "unable to renegotiate an expiring contract [for renewable power] with competitive pricing." It made a similar statement in its *2012 Global Responsibility Report* when it explained its slow progress on switching to renewable power by noting, "It has sometimes been difficult to find and fund low-carbon technologies that meet our ROI [return-on-investment] requirements."

In other words, Walmart is interested in shifting away from fossil fuels only if it can do so at little or no cost and without any impact on its profits. It's not that Walmart can't afford to do more; it just doesn't want to. Walmart generated \$16 billion in profit last year. The Walton family, which owns half of Walmart stock, is worth \$145 billion.¹¹

Retailer	Annual Green Power Usage (kWh)	Green Power as % of Total Electricity Use
Whole Foods Market	800,257,623	107%
Kohl's Department Stores	1,536,529,000	105%
Staples	635,982,674	102%
Nuu-Muu*		100%
Starbucks	592,462,522	70%
McDonald's USA	309,185,000	30%
Best Buy	151,306,000	12%
Ahold USA (Stop & Shop, Giant)	155,985,720	8%
Walmart Stores, Inc.	751,431,792	4%

* One of two dozen independent retailers in Bellingham, Washington, that has transitioned to renewable energy
 Source: EPA's Green Power Partnership, Top Partner Rankings, March 18, 2013, and data compiled by Sustainable Connections in Bellingham, Washington.

Walmart Ignores Major Sources of Climate Pollution in its Operations

In its filings with the CDP and in its annual Global Responsibility reports, Walmart does not count or acknowledge all of the climate pollution it generates.

One major source of greenhouse gases omitted from Walmart's accounting is its international shipping. The company is the largest importer of containerized ocean cargo in the U.S. by a wide margin. Last year, Walmart imported 720,000 TEUs into the U.S., almost two-and-a-half times the volume of goods it imported a decade earlier.¹² Walmart now accounts for one of every twenty-five containers shipped to the U.S. and its imports are growing faster than the country's as a whole.¹³ Moreover, these figures significantly understate the company's shipping volume, as they count only Walmart's direct imports and do not include goods imported on its behalf by suppliers.

In tallying its climate pollution, Walmart simply ignores the enormous volume of greenhouse gases generated by its international shipping operations. Despite the harm done to the climate, Walmart has been unwilling to rethink this aspect of its business model.

Ocean shipping is a leading source of climate pollution, accounting for more CO2 emissions than all but five countries.¹⁴ Thanks to the sourcing practices of Walmart and other retailers, international shipping is growing rapidly. According to the International Maritime Organization, if left on its current trajectory, shipping's contribution to climate pollution will skyrocket from 3 percent of global CO2 emissions to 18 percent by 2050.¹⁵ CO2, moreover, is only part of the climate pollution generated by cargo ships. These ships burn a particularly dirty fuel, known as bunker fuel, which produces black carbon (soot) and nitrogen oxide (a precursor to smog), both of which contribute significantly to global warming and air pollution.¹⁶

Even as the climate crisis has revealed the dire, life-threatening consequences of Walmart's far-flung global supply chain, the company has so far been unwilling to rethink this aspect of its business model and to significantly reduce the distance between where goods are produced and where they are sold.

Instead, Walmart has engineered more publicity stunts. Earlier this year, the company made a splash when it pledged to increase its purchases of American-made goods by \$50 billion over the next 10 years.¹⁷ This figure initially sounds huge, until you measure it against Walmart's galactic size. An additional \$5 billion a year amounts to only 1.5 percent of what Walmart spends on goods.¹⁸ And much of this modest shift to domestic sources will happen automatically as Walmart builds more supercenters and Neighborhood Markets and thereby increases the grocery share of its U.S. sales.¹⁹ (Most groceries sold in U.S. supermarkets are produced domestically.)

In Accounting for Its Climate Pollution...

Walmart Includes Emissions from:	Walmart Ignores Emissions from:
Electricity & Utilities	International Shipping
Domestic Shipping	Land Development & Construction
	Increased Driving by Consumers
	Manufacture of Store-Brand Products

A second major source of climate pollution that Walmart does not acknowledge or address is the pollution created by clearing land and building stores. Between 2005 and 2012, Walmart opened 1,316 new supercenters in the U.S. Counting all of its store types, Walmart built about 200 million square feet of new store space nationwide, expanding its U.S. footprint by more than one-third in just 7 years.²⁰ The company plans to continue this pace of land development. Its 2014-2015 investment plans call for 516 new stores in the U.S. and another 26 to 28 million square feet of store expansion elsewhere in the world.²¹

Walmart's 2014-2015 plans call for 516 new stores in the U.S., most of which will be single-story, auto-oriented designs that maximize land consumption and climate pollution.

Most of these stores will follow Walmart's standard single-story, auto-oriented design, which maximizes land consumption. The typical Walmart supercenter requires 12 to 16 acres of land for the store and its parking lot. Despite a record number vacant shopping centers and empty big-box stores now available for redevelopment in nearly every market, Walmart almost always bypasses these sites in favor of building on fresh land.²² In reporting its climate pollution, the company does not count the impact of turning these CO₂-absorbing forests and fields into asphalt.

Walmart's preference for erecting new buildings, rather than occupying existing vacancies, also has major climate implications, which its sustainability program ignores. New Walmart stores are made mostly of cement and steel, two materials with high levels of "embodied" carbon, meaning they require a lot of energy to manufacture. Studies have found that the energy embodied in construction materials can account for 30-60 percent of the total energy used by a building over 50 years – a lifespan that is decades longer than Walmart typically occupies its buildings.²³

Moreover, Walmart's continued expansion is undermining the viability of much more environmentally sustainable retail districts. Traditional, compact neighborhood business

districts are more accessible by walking and transit. They are also more energy efficient. This is true even of historic Main Street buildings, which, with their shared walls and thermal mass, are more energy-efficient on average than commercial buildings built during the rest of the 20th century.²⁴

Walmart does more than simply ignore all of the climate pollution associated with its land development practices. It also actively seeks to evade required environmental reviews. In California, for example, Walmart has found a way to skirt the state's Environmental Quality Act, including the law's provisions on reducing the climate impact of development. By gathering signatures and submitting its construction projects as ballot initiatives, Walmart ensures they won't be subject to the act. Under the initiative process, city governments must either approve the stores outright, with no conditions, or spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to hold a special election. Facing budget shortfalls, most cities just give in. Walmart has used this technique to secure approval for at least seven new supercenters without going through the standard environmental and climate pollution impact review and mitigation.²⁵

One of the most profound climate impacts of Walmart's business model lies in the way the retailer has changed the geography and traffic patterns of our communities. Walmart's growth and dominance of the retail sector has dramatically increased the amount of driving required for day-to-day errands. Between 1990 and 2009 – a period when Walmart grew from a regional chain to a national juggernaut – the number of miles the average American household logged each year for shopping grew by more than 42 percent.²⁶ In fact, almost half of the total increase in U.S. driving in this period can be attributed to shifting retail patterns. By 2009, the average household was driving nearly 1,000 miles more to and from stores each year than it did in 1990.²⁷ For the country as a whole, that's an extra 149 billion miles on the road each year.

Walmart is now bringing this auto-intensive shopping model to the rest of world, with the aim of replacing more environmentally friendly neighborhood retail districts and public markets with its own highly polluting model of development.

Walmart's Supply Chain Pollution Reduction Claims Lack Accountability

Unwilling to make the fundamental operational changes necessary to address its own climate impact, Walmart announced in 2010 that it would focus on its global supply chain. The company said it would compel factories producing goods for its shelves to cut their greenhouse gas emissions and promised a reduction of 20 million metric tons by 2015.²⁸

Walmart has a dismal track record of following through on its promises to create safe working conditions in its 60,000 supplier factories. There is little reason to believe its promises on pollution reduction will fare any better.

But in the aftermath of two horrific accidents over the last year at Bangladesh factories, it has become clear that Walmart has no credibility with regard to its supply chain. In its *2012 Global Responsibility Report*, Walmart devotes over a dozen pages to extolling its Ethical Sourcing program and even touts its achievements with regard to reducing safety risks at Bangladesh factories. Seven months after the report's publication, major fire safety risks at Bangladesh factories led to the deaths of over 100 workers sewing apparel for Walmart and other chains. Five months after that, another Bangladesh garment factory supplying Walmart collapsed, killing over 1,000 people.

In both cases, Walmart misled reporters about its involvement with the factories until contradictory evidence emerged.²⁹ Reporting by the Associated Press also revealed that Walmart had been instrumental in scuttling an industry-wide garment factory safety initiative in Bangladesh in 2011.³⁰

Clearly Walmart cannot be relied on to be transparent and accountable when it comes to the conditions in its roughly 60,000 supplier factories, or even to be forthcoming about which factories it is using. The company routinely puts its own bottom-line ahead of worker safety. There is little reason to believe that it will behave any differently with regard to pollution measures at these factories. Indeed, even as Walmart has been promoting its program to cut energy usage and waste streams at a small number of Chinese factories, it has also been rapidly shifting apparel production to Bangladesh to take advantage of the lower costs inherent in the country's lax environmental and safety standards.³¹

Walmart Finances Candidates Who Block Action on Climate

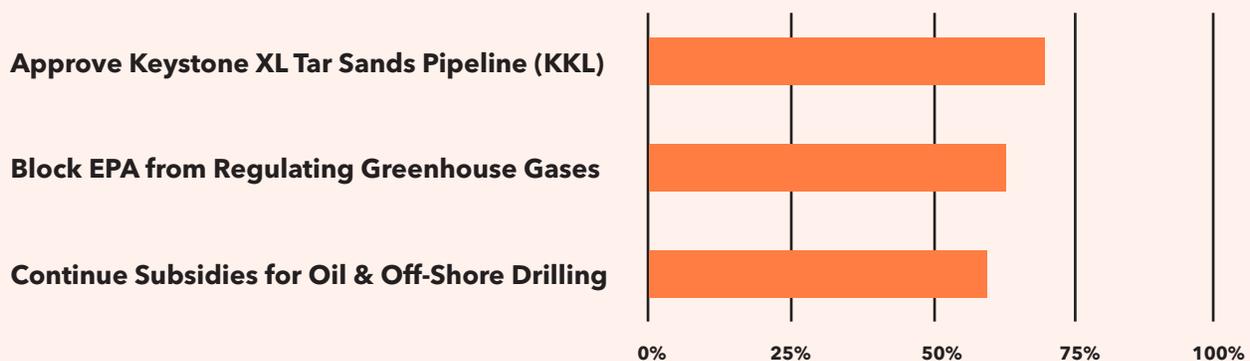
In the years since Walmart launched its sustainability campaign, even as it was touting its commitment to addressing the climate crisis in press releases and media events, the company was funneling a river of campaign cash to lawmakers who would ensure that the U.S. did absolutely nothing to curb greenhouse gas emissions. That Walmart has used its considerable political muscle to undermine desperately needed climate legislation, ensuring that greenhouse gas pollution continues to grow unabated, ranks as one of the company's most egregious environmental offenses.

Walmart spends considerable sums of money to influence the political process. Since 2003, the company's political action committee (PAC) has given over \$22 million to federal and state candidates and political parties, making it one of the largest political donors in the country.³² Walmart's PAC is not the only way the company advances its political interests. Walmart-founder Sam Walton's heirs, the Walton family – who own more than half of Walmart's stock and thus control the company – use their vast wealth to fund both state and federal candidates, including many of the same politicians supported by Walmart's PAC.

Between 2005 and 2012, Walmart and the Walton family gave more than half of their total Congressional campaign donations to members of Congress with lifetime scores of 30 or less on the League of Conservation Voters scorecard (meaning they voted against the environment at least 70 percent of the time).³³

Walmart's money has been on the wrong side of every important vote on the climate crisis. During the 2007-2008 election cycle, 80 percent of Walmart's Senate campaign contributions went to senators who blocked the Lieberman-Warner cap-and-trade bill. During the 2011-2012 election cycle, 70 percent of contributions from Walmart and the Walton family went to lawmakers who voted in favor of the Keystone XL Tar Sands Pipeline. Campaign donations from Walmart and the Waltons also heavily favored lawmakers who voted to block the EPA's ability to regulate CO2 and those who fought to keep subsidies for Big Oil.³⁴

Share of Their Campaign Contributions that Walmart and the Walton Family Gave to Candidates Who Voted to:



Sources: Voting records data is from the 2012 League of Conservation Voters Scorecard and campaign donation data is from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Among the top recipients of Walmart's financial support are many of the nation's most powerful climate-change deniers. Since 2005, Walmart's PAC has given \$35,000 to House Speaker John Boehner ("the idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen that is harmful to our environment is almost comical"³⁵); \$38,000 to House Majority Leader Eric Cantor ("If there's been any constant in human history, it's been climate change. The real question is... the involvement of human causes"³⁶); \$30,000 to Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri ("there isn't any real science to say we are altering the climate path of the earth"³⁷); and \$29,500 to Senator John Boozman of Arkansas ("you can look back at some of the previous times when there was no industrialization, you had these different ages, ice ages, and things warming"³⁸).

Walmart wields significant political influence at the state level as well. The company is one of the top donors to candidates for state office, having spent \$12.7 million to influence state politics between 2003 and 2012.³⁹ As with its federal giving, Walmart has channeled its support to candidates who oppose environmental regulations, including efforts to address the climate crisis. Among the top dozen state-level recipients of Walmart's cash over the last nine years are three prominent climate-change-denying governors: Rick Perry of Texas; Bob McDonnell of Virginia; and Mitch Daniels, governor of Indiana from 2005 to 2013. Also on the list are Pennsylvania's Gov. Tom Corbett and Lt. Gov. Jim Cawley, who have been working hard to protect the fracking industry from regulation.

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In addition to backing candidates, Walmart uses its cash to influence local and state ballot initiatives, including some measures that affect the environment. In Florida, for example, it provided \$100,000 in 2010 to finance a campaign that limited citizens' ability to protect land from development.⁴⁰

The influence that Walmart and the Waltons have on our political process does not end with their donations to candidates. They also fund organizations that are orchestrating major campaigns to block climate action. Walmart is a leading member of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which organized a massive campaign against the cap-and-trade bill and is currently leading a lobbying effort in support of the Keystone XL Tar Sands Pipeline.⁴¹ The Walton family, meanwhile, is funding ALEC, which has successfully fought state bills to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and shift to renewable power.⁴²

Conclusion

Behind all of Walmart's slick greenwashing is a business model that is fundamentally unsustainable. It depends on a highly polluting, far-flung global supply chain and a network of sprawling supercenters.

It exploits workers and wields political influence to undermine the common good. Its expansion threatens to wipe out more sustainable local economic systems built around small, homegrown businesses and replace them with a global

monolith. Rather than falling sway to Walmart's greenwashing campaign, we need to counter its relentless growth and confront its business practices head-on, demanding far more for workers, communities, and the environment. ■

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- 8 Walmart, *2013 Global Responsibility Report*.
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- 36 John Boehner interview on *This Week* on ABC News, April 20, 2009.
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- 38 “Dems in Disarray on Global Warming Tax; Repubs say ‘No’ to Writing Their Own,” *Human Events*, April 29, 2009.
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