

It Must Be the Climate

From Tobacco Tactics to Gaslighting Exposing NW Natural's Misinformation Playbook

Regionally, gas utilities are using 'tobacco tactics' to avoid regulation. What do these tactics involve? Scholars have categorized the tobacco industry's three tactics as:

1. **information management** - creating and disseminating industry-friendly evidence while attacking public health evidence¹;
2. **reputation management** - rehabilitating the reputation of the industry while attacking public health advocates, researchers and organizations;
3. **coalition management** - build an industry coalition while fragmenting the opposing coalition.

The tobacco industry pioneered the use of these tactics, deploying them in different combinations and contexts. Tobacco industry messaging was most dangerous when used simultaneously with a plethora of seemingly neutral or independent front groups.

The success of these tactics in delaying and watering-down regulation came at the expense of consumers' health and wellbeing. Moreover, the tobacco industry often focused its messaging on ethnic and cultural minorities, people of lower socioeconomic status, people with language barriers, socially isolated or socially ostracized groups like the LGBTQIA+ community, people of lower educational achievement and lower healthcare literacy, as well as those traumatized by the healthcare industry and/or already suffering from medical or institutional mistrust.

For example, the Public Health Law Center at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law found that tobacco companies introduced menthol cigarettes originally as a way to "make cigarettes appear less harsh and more appealing to new smokers and young people, as well as older smokers," then later aggressively targeted menthol cigarette advertising towards African Americans, even as evidence has emerged that "people who smoke menthol cigarettes have more difficulty quitting than those who smoke non-mentholated cigarettes, and are less likely to quit successfully, despite numerous intentions to quit and quit attempts."² This is not ancient history: the tobacco industry continues today to aggressively oppose local and federal regulations curtailing menthol cigarettes and other flavored tobacco products.³

While pioneered by the tobacco industry, these tactics have become the standard playbook for any industry seeking to stall, prevent or roll-back regulation of its product.

As we have seen in Eugene, NW Natural is now openly using these tactics in response to local efforts to regulate gas in new buildings and the growing public awareness of the health concerns associated with gas use in the home. With respect to information management, recent reporting by NPR and the Climate Investigations Center demonstrated that **the wider gas industry has known since the 1970s that nitrogen oxides (NOx) emissions from gas stoves in the home heighten the risk of asthma and other respiratory illnesses. In response, the industry covertly funded studies to undermine the emerging scientific basis for this knowledge.** Despite these efforts, a wide body of scientific evidence now demonstrates the connection between gas use in the home, high NOx emissions levels, and respiratory illness, with one recent study calculating that more than 12% of childhood asthma cases nationwide can be attributed to gas stove pollution.⁴ Yet, **NW Natural has continued to double-down on denying this science**, insisting that the air quality concerns with gas stoves are the same as electric stoves (they aren't – electric stoves don't emit NOx), and that ventilation is the determining factor in indoor air quality (studies have shown that it isn't). Worse still, **NW Natural has hired the consulting firm Gradient Corp., whose previous clients include – you guessed it – Big Tobacco, to produce industry-friendly analyses and give testimony at public hearings.**⁵



NW Natural has also engaged in reputation management by touting their aspirations to become a net-zero emissions gas utility transporting "renewable molecules underground" including expenditure of more than \$100,000 to develop a school curriculum propagandizing the benefits of "renewable natural" gas. **In reality, NW Natural's own disclosures show that its renewable natural gas procurement is way behind its own internal goals and failing to keep pace with its growing gas supply in Oregon, amounting to only 0.15% of its energy supply in 2022.** More broadly, the gas industry has paid celebrity chefs to tout the benefits of gas stoves on social media, even as some of the world's most famous restaurants and chefs are switching to induction.

NW Natural has aggressively engaged in coalition management tactics. This includes its funding and other forms of support for a number of local and regional front groups, such as "Eugene Residents for Energy Choice," which received over \$1 million (over 99.9%) of its funding from NW Natural. **Speaking of "choice," gas utilities' emphasis on individual choice and responsibility bears a striking resemblance to tobacco industry rhetoric around second-hand smoke.**⁶ This framing ignores the wider public health issues associated with gas use up and down the pipeline, including fracking, methane leaks and outdoor NOx pollution from venting. Furthermore, NW Natural and the wider gas industry have sought to drive a wedge between supporters of climate action, particularly around so-called "renewable" natural gas and hydrogen development.

Eugenians have a reputation for being health-conscious and should see these tactics for what they are as the body of evidence exposing gas industry misinformation continues to grow. In a new study, *Fumes in Focus: Visualizing air pollution from gas stoves*, local non-profit Beyond Toxics provides data analysis and a shocking short documentary showing camera footage of the gas emissions from stoves in Eugene homes. **On December 11, 2023, dozens of Oregon organizations and elected officials wrote to the Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, calling for an investigation into NW Natural's unscrupulous tactics. Stay engaged with this issue by checking out the resources linked in the QR codes below.**

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