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UConn students to university: Divest from fossil fuels. 'Climate change is here.'

UConn's Storrs campus.

Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant

UConn's Storrs campus.



By **JESSIKA HARKAY** | CT Mirror

PUBLISHED: September 28, 2023 at 6:45 a.m. | UPDATED: September 28, 2023 at 2:15 p.m.

After obtaining more than 1,000 online signatures of support within two weeks, a group of students at the [University of Connecticut](#) pleaded with university officials to commit to [a plan for divesting from fossil fuels and work toward decarbonizing the campus](#).

"Our continued dependence on fossil fuels for our energy needs ... directly undermines our human rights mission and university mission statement — more broadly — by denying members of our global community their right to a safe and healthy environment," Nell Srinath, a senior political science and journalism student, said at the Board of Trustees meeting this week.

"The university mission statement states the goal of enhancing social, economic, cultural and natural environments of the state and beyond. I hope you realize as well that it is impossible to fulfill these commitments if we're not fully doing our

“Climate change is here and is already causing irreparable harm which will get increasingly catastrophic if left unchecked,” added Thomas Bonitz, a geographic information science and economics student. “The present moment is our best chance to avoid disaster and cultivate a brighter future and prepare for future generations. You all have the power to transform this university into one that cares for and achieves a sustainable tomorrow.”

Last year, UConn President [Radenka Maric](#) announced the university’s goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. A “comprehensive Sustainability Action Plan” was expected to be released in the spring of 2023, according to a news release from December 2022 — something students say never happened.

“We’ve been told over and over again that something’s coming out and they have given us no evidence that it’s even being worked on,” said Colin Rosadino, a second-year law student, who’s leading the push to get the UConn board to divest from fossil fuels. “We want to know that somebody’s working on it. We want to see evidence of that. We work with the administration a lot, and we’re on a working group with the administration to work on sustainability stuff — and they don’t show us that. So we’re hoping that we can get that through our actions today and in the future.”

Rosadino said the student group “Fossil Fuel Free UConn” last received an update on Sept. 23 from administrators that the plan was still being worked on.

“We feel like we’re being waited out like ‘This group of students will graduate in bunches in four years. Let’s wait them out,’” said Monet Paredes, a senior political science and environmental studies major. “They’re not saying that, but it’s implied because nothing’s been done. ... We’re not letting this go. There are students that will come after us, and there’s been students who came before us trying to do this.”

A spokesperson from UConn did not immediately confirm whether the plan was released yet or would be soon.

In 2006, the university switched from “several oil-fired utility boilers,” to a natural gas powered Cogeneration Plant, which officials said made “a more efficient, green-friendly approach to providing the energy that powers UConn Storrs.”

The university's plant produced nearly 87,700 tons of carbon dioxide emissions in 2021, according to data by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, which is the equivalent to burning over 8.95 million gallons of gas or the average yearly energy use of 10,027 homes.

Following public comment at the Board of Trustees meeting Wednesday, Maric's President Report welcomed the university's new freshman class and introduced goals for the academic year including building on research, additional funding and doubling down on how sustainability continues to be a forefront issue at UConn.

A presentation from professor Xiao-Dong Zhou, who's also the new director of the Center for Clean Energy Engineering, also highlighted initiatives, including identifying "key clusters" for sustainability like breaking down energy conservation projects and their annual economic and environmental benefits.

Zhou also welcomed a partnership with students.

"Please come to my office, organize a call with me, I would love to hear more from you," Zhou said. "Talk to me today, tomorrow, or in the next few days, but don't wait a week or a month. ... I want to have a two-way dialogue."

And though Paredes and Rosadino said Maric's administration has generally been receptive to their advocacy, they're hesitant to think the board will immediately move forward with a plan. The two students said their group plans to continue pushing the Board of Trustees to provide financial backing and support.

"We're going to be at the next board meeting in October," Paredes said. "We also are reaching out to student organizations and department heads for an endorsement letter that we want to deliver to them, just endorsing the demands and saying we want this — not just Fossil Fuel Free UConn — but all these student groups that have a stake in this issue, no matter if you're involved in climate activism or not."

Board members seemed receptive on Wednesday to students' comments and thanked them for speaking out.

Other universities like Harvard, Princeton, Boston University, NYU and UMass

More recently, New York University pledged to end its reliance on fossil fuels earlier this month. William Berkley, chair of NYU's Board of Trustees, said the university planned to "[slash] greenhouse emissions from building energy, reduce food-related emissions and ... achieve net zero by 2040," [according to a report from The Guardian](#).

Jessika Harkay is a reporter for The Connecticut Mirror (<https://ctmirror.org/>).

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