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# Prominent alumni ramp up pressure on universities to divest

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**Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has joined an effort to get Harvard University to divest from fossil fuels.**

**By Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 20, 2015

Actress Natalie Portman and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Friday joined a growing number of Harvard University alumni calling for a week of sit-ins at the school to pressure the administration to divest from fossil fuels.

In a letter scheduled to be published and distributed online on Friday, more than two dozen powerful alumni of Harvard University — including politicians, religious leaders, Hollywood actors, and environmentalists — vowed that at least some of them will participate in several days of action, including sit-ins and rallies, at the Cambridge campus in April and called for other graduates to join the effort, which has been dubbed “Heat Week.”

“Divestment is effective,” said the letter, whose signatories included Portman, Kennedy, former US senator Tim Wirth, philosopher Cornel West, director Darren Aronofsky, and architect Maya Lin. “While we can’t bankrupt the oil companies,



we can start to politically bankrupt them, complicating their ability to dominate our political life.”

In recent years, students, faculty, and prominent alumni from major colleges and universities across the country have called on their schools to divest from companies that produce oil, gas, and coal because the fuels have been identified as a cause of global warming. The steps taken have included trying to divert donations away from their alma maters and joining student-led protests at the campuses.

A key target of the movement has been Harvard, which at \$36.4 billion, has the largest endowment of any college in the world. Harvard President Drew G. Faust has said the school does not plan to divest, despite protests and petitions from [students](#) and [faculty](#).

Harvard Law alumnus Bevis Longstreth, a retired lawyer and former Securities and Exchange Commissioner who signed the letter, said the university should be leading the divestment movement.

“Harvard is the most prominent and highly regarded university in the world,” he said by phone Thursday. “With the kind of reputation Harvard has comes a high responsibility to guide others.”

“What Harvard does will be followed by a very large number of other institutional investors,” he added. “If Harvard were to think this through, they would understand that their present position is betting on the destruction of the world.”

Meanwhile, alumni from [Harvard](#) and a growing number of other institutions — including Columbia, Swarthmore, and the University of California — have in recent months established special funds that aim to intercept would-be donations to the colleges and hold onto the gifts until the schools agree to divest.

The [Multi-School Fossil Free Divestment Fund](#) was recently launched by alumni and students from 17 different colleges, including MIT, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Tufts, Boston College, Northeastern, Brandeis, Wellesley, and Williams.

The fund collects tax-deductible donations “for those who would like to give to an educational institution but are hesitant because the institution invests in the environmentally, financially, and morally hazardous fossil fuel industry,” organizers said.

The money will be invested and held by the fund. If a school publicly commits to divest from fossil fuels,

donations earmarked for that college will be given to the school.

Money earmarked for colleges that have not divested by Dec. 31, 2017, will be given to schools that have divested, organizers said.

Morgan Curtis, 23, who graduated from Dartmouth last spring, said the fund has collected donations from nearly 100 individuals so far. She declined to say how much money the fund has accumulated.

“We’ve had a wonderful swell of interest so far,” she said. “The purpose of the fund is to leverage the greatest power that alumni hold: their annual donations.”

And she noted that national college rankings are partially based on yearly alumni giving.

Rajesh Kasturirangan, a 44-year-old mathematician who earned a doctorate from MIT in cognitive science, said he made a contribution to the divestment escrow fund.

“It’s a brilliant idea, because it will get people who have never given before to think about and donate to their schools,” said Kasturirangan, who said he has never donated to MIT before.

Nineteen US colleges have pledged to divest from fossil fuels in some form, though most that have done so have modest endowments.

Stanford University is by far the best known and wealthiest college to pledge to do so. The school, which has an endowment worth \$21.4 billion, said in May that it would divest from publicly traded coal mining companies.

Harvard alumnus Bill McKibben, an environmental activist who signed the alumni letter, said he plans to visit his alma mater in April to peacefully protest alongside students.

“A number of us alumni were watching the students and faculty doing their best and thought we should jump in to help because Harvard is slow to act on these sorts of things,” he said by phone Thursday.

“Climate change is a time test,” added McKibben. “If we don’t act very quickly — well, Boston is getting a taste right now of what a changed climate looks like.”

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