

Short Communication
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The Rise of Corporate “Green Hesitancy” and “Green Hushing”

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of multinational corporations have set ambitious environmental goals and implementation plans to reduce their environmental impacts. Yet analysis paralysis and fear of rebuke for missteps and insufficiency have begun impeding voluntary environmental action across corporate value chains. Corporate environmental action has become like a game of Frogger, where inaction and silence has become safer than taking a step forward to reduce emissions or environmental impacts. There is an opportunity for environmental nonprofits to tackle this commonly discussed yet underreported and veiled issue. With new incentives, user-specific solutions, and new ways to make money from environmental regeneration, environmental nonprofits can better convert corporate environmental action from the game of Frogger to simply the way that corporations do business.

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Corporate environmental action has become like the game of Frogger. For corporate sustainability decision makers, crossing the road from the current state of a business misaligned to a future state of a business aligned with decarbonization and ecosystem generation requires caution. Take a mistimed step or fail to take a large enough step, then you may very well get run over by a speeding bulldozer.

From working personally with Fortune 100 companies and startups across the climate sphere, it is clear that countless companies want to demonstrate environmental leadership across their direct operations and wider value chains. However, speak with these companies today and you will likely observe hesitancy to implement investments that would reduce their environmental impacts. Too many standards remain in flux, from the chilling effect of the Greenhouse Gas Protocol’s current multi-year revision process to the confusion and counterproductive outcomes that the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) created. Talk to others and you will also likely find a similarly reluctance to talk publicly about various environmental measures they deployed. These concerning trends of, respectively, “green hesitancy” and “green hushing” among individual companies undermine systemic investments to reduce pollution and reverse ecosystem decline.

What in the world is going on?

One diagnosis is that companies are not serious about achieving their climate targets. However, a less obvious but more likely case is that these trends are a result of analytical purity and strategy development perfection, encouraged by the environmental nonprofit ecosystem, that has become the unintended enemy of fast and bold environmental action. In other words, behind the scenes, the perfect (or, said more aptly, the obfuscation promulgated by certain nonprofits and academic researchers) has become the enemy of the good. And perfection is the enemy of fast climate action.

Green Hesitancy and Green Hushing are becoming more Problematic than Green Washing

Greenwashing is a phenomenon whereby a company overstates its environmental action or uses its environmental action seemingly to distract from other issues associated with that company is a problem, albeit one that a vigilant global nonprofit ecosystem is addressing. Greenwashing also is not the only “green” problem among corporations. There are three other corporate green behavior that pose an even greater problem than greenwashing, including:

- **Green Crowding:** Hiding inaction in a crowd.
- **Green Hesitancy:** Doing nothing from fear of criticism of insufficient steps or missteps.
- **Green Hushing:** Under-communicating action from fear of similar criticism.

In the present reality where the script for the environmentally-aligned corporate action is getting written in real-time and where the audience of observers have a tendency to throw tomatoes at any performance it is understandable why companies have stage fright for taking environmental action and putting it on public display. The result: a smaller than necessary cast with members that show battle scars and cannot possibly deliver the full performance for economy-wide reversal of pollution and ecosystem degradation trends.

Green hesitancy is arguably the greatest problem of them all in this context because it means that companies find themselves in one of two situations: either companies are genuinely fearful about moving forward with implementing their environmental strategy until they perfect it or they use strategic perfectionism as a purposeful veil for perpetual environmental inaction. In both situations, the source of the problem is insufficient incentives and solutions for companies to take environmental action and do so swiftly. Instead, the current set of corporate incentives encourages multifaceted, complex analyses and ambitious goal setting as a prerequisite for environmental action. These incentives paralyze action among those with well-meaning and poor intentions alike, resulting in less action than otherwise would take place.

Green hushing is a problematic cousin of green hesitancy in that businesses like people are social and want to keep up with industry norms. If companies are less vocal about the environmental action they take because the incentive is stronger for them to underreport their green credentials, then this diminishes peer pressure and companies take less action than they otherwise would have taken had they known the action that their peers are taking. Moreover, this underreporting may also have policymaking impacts by reducing policymakers’ level of ambition and regulatory implementation for environmental action.

How To Motivate and Enable More (Verifiable) Environmental Action by Corporations

To motivate corporations to align their operations with decarbonization and environmental regeneration, they not only require incentives to reduce their environmental impacts but more importantly require additional tools and support to transform the way they do their work. This means introducing an entirely new choice architecture where corporations generate business value and defeat competitors through new products and services that reverse problematic environmental trends and ultimately deliver regeneration.

Consider the case of “Scope 3” emissions, which include the emissions from everything associated with a company besides the emissions it pollutes on-site (“Scope 1”) or from its purchased electricity (“Scope 2”). Companies are beginning to pay more attention to their Scope 3 emissions since it typically represents the majority of their emissions. However, the data necessary to develop precise greenhouse gas inventories about a company’s respective emissions from its upstream value chain partners (i.e., its suppliers) to its downstream value chain partners (i.e., its customers) and everything in between (e.g., its employees’ commuting, business travel, investments, sponsorships, and more) is typically difficult, if not impossible, to acquire. In addition to this data collection challenge, nonprofits suggest that corporations must develop comprehensive plans before they get started taking any action. This means that a company must take a year or two to develop a plan before they act. Once a company completes its plan and has it approved, nonprofits impose arbitrary limitations around what environmental actions this company can count in its annual reporting.

For example, imagine a company wants to reduce Scope 3 emissions associated with its value chain partners’ electricity use (i.e., its value chain partners’ Scope 2), given how it has at its disposal a readily available solution it can deploy to decarbonize its partners’ purchased electricity: renewable energy procurement. Let’s say it wants to start by helping its customers power their use of the company’s product or service with renewables, where the company then secures energy attribute certificates and allocates it to its customers, enabling the company to not only send new market signals for renewables that increases global investment in power sector decarbonization but also differentiate its product in competitive landscapes. Not only do nonprofit rules say that this company must match its level of renewable energy procurement to the proportional level of its customers’ electricity use in each country with customers, which creates procurement challenges for countries where its customers’ electricity use is low and in countries with limited or no supply options, but nonprofit rules also currently lack clarity around whether this company’s environmental action on behalf of customers would count at all in their disclosures.

In this case, the ecosystem of environmental nonprofits can help unlock even more much-needed financing for the energy transition and help meet the need of tripling global annual investments in renewables by 2030 by making it clear that the company can (and

should) procure renewables on behalf of its customers based on good-enough estimates.

The Crucial Role of Environmental Nonprofits for Scaling Corporate Environmental Action

There is a tremendous opportunity and need for the environmental nonprofit ecosystem to do better. We need them to work more effectively to unleash a more than tripling of climate investments and adoption of new behaviors among more corporations in order to slash global emissions and reverse ecosystem decline and species loss.

Nonprofits can begin by shifting their centrum of focus to addressing barriers to action rather than generating more analysis and awareness about the techno-economic opportunities of different mitigation technologies and practices. This would change how they tackle problems and put the end user (i.e., the specific decision maker or adopter) of a new mitigation technology or practice at the center of their resource development.

Furthermore, the nonprofit ecosystem can begin better coordinating solution development amongst themselves and developing modular open-source “software” packages that clarify these end user-specific technical requirements of different solutions and user stories of different users in a harmonized format. These software packages, shared open-source for streamlined collaboration and use by anyone, would help introduce the common ingredients that enable companies to create and scale new products and services that deliver positive environmental outcomes.

Environmental nonprofits must also expand rather than diminish the incentives for more companies to participate in contributing to economy-wide reductions in pollution and extraction as these transformations to how corporations generate value for environmental regeneration take shape. Make it clear that all action is good and better than none, even if the actions and underlying analysis are based on best-effort yet rapid estimates.

With new incentives, user-specific solutions, and new ways for companies to make money from decarbonization and environmental regeneration, environmental nonprofits can better convert corporate environmental action from the game of Frogger to simply the way that corporations do business.

About the Author

Doug Miller is a systems entrepreneur with over a decade of experience in clean energy markets, corporate sustainability, business model innovation, behavioral design, and open-source software development. He developed numerous clean energy industry-shaping initiatives, publications, and tools for decarbonization solutions in his roles at various leading global nonprofits. He is also a cleantech startup founder and advisor. Doug holds degrees with top academic honors and departmental awards from Imperial College London and the University of Pennsylvania for his research on applying behavioral science to environmental solutions. He received the 2024 Green Power Leadership Award for Leadership in Education.

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