

2918-26: McPhee vs Vancouver Sun

April 27 2018 – *for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint that an opinion article in the Vancouver Sun contained misinformation and unsupported facts.

The complainant, Alan McPhee, said an April 6 2018 opinion article, published in The Vancouver Sun with the headline “Oil companies asked to pay their fair share of climate-related costs”, contained a statement that was not supported by facts.

He said the opening sentence, "Devastating droughts, wildfires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, freak snowstorms and sea level rise linked to climate change have already exacted staggering costs, with billions more to come as land and sea temperatures continue to rise", is not supported by evidence for what he called an “apocalyptic” claim.

The complainant referred in some detail to data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and stated the absence of sea level monitoring by the Vancouver port authority as evidence that the article contained misinformation.

The newspaper responded by stating the article represented the columnist’s strong opinion on the threats posed by climate change and the need to hold oil companies accountable.

The news organization said the first sentence summarized the general consensus of international scientists on climate change and its impacts, and was supported by reference to a 2011 government-funded study that estimated the cumulative costs of addressing climate change.

The news organization urged the complainant to express any contrary opinion by submitting a letter to the editor for consideration.

In reviewing the article and materials provided, the NNC found the column was in large part about a petition and legal campaigns lobbying for policies to fund projects that address the impact of climate-change. It cited Victoria, San Francisco and New York, noted that four other B.C. municipalities are involved, and quoted a person engaged in the campaign, from the campaign letter, and from an oil company’s response.

In this view, the article was balanced and met widely accepted journalistic standards.

The NNC found the opening sentence was followed by two paragraphs with comment from the Surrey mayor about the cost of dealing with flood control measures, and a third paragraph citing the National Round Table on Environment and Economics.

The NNC agreed with the newspaper that those paragraphs supported the statement. In light of the above, Council found no breach of journalistic standards and no basis for a complaint.

The complainant referred to statistics on degrees of probability indicated by scientists around the impact of climate change, as referenced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Broadly speaking, the NNC has found in other cases involving research that journalists have the prerogative to use the sources of their choice. Specifically to this data, Council noted a vast majority of scientists agreed that an impact from climate change was 'likely' to 'very likely'.

The NNC has also found that in cases like climate change, where the preponderance of evidence is on one side of the issue, there is no need to give an exhaustive account of dissenting views. However, best journalistic practices in this case could include a link to the studies noted in the article in the digital edition for readers' clarity.

For the reasons above, the complaint is dismissed.

The complainant also took exception that readers were directed to a Facebook plug-in to comment on articles. The NNC declined to comment on a news organization's decisions about how to provide commenting and social media access.