



## 10 climate NGOs companies should know

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By **Elsa Wenzel**

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Corporate sustainability professionals often speak of "moving the needle." At the risk of mixing metaphors, sometimes industries really need a poke from a different kind of needle to move faster. Nonprofit groups, pursuing a noble cause, setting long-term goals and owing nothing to shareholders, can provide that jab.

No single organization can solve systemic, planetary problems on its own. Green business efforts regularly enlist not-for-profit groups to share resources, bridge gaps among competitors and mobilize for mutual interests, nudging the odometer dial forward. When a corporation makes an ambitious, science-based sustainability commitment, an NGO may provide the scientific and technical proficiency to execute on it. Nonprofits also grab the mic to preach about problems that corporate leadership would rather muffle or mute. On controversial issues and initiatives, a business may take a stand without taking the flak by partnering with an outspoken nonprofit. Some not-for-profit organizations consult with downstream community members and the general public to help a business better understand the potential impacts of its actions.

Each NGO featured in this article demonstrates a clear cause-and-effect for how it's effecting change in business, industry or society at large. Some agitate, point fingers and shake up the status quo. Others are diplomats, policy partners or collaborative technological innovators. All are ultimately changing the practices of sustainable business.

Mainline "Big Green" groups, such as Greenpeace, WWF and Sierra Club, are already household names. Here is a sampling of 10 lesser-known, yet influential, nonprofits changing minds, influencing lawmakers and turning the heads of sustainability teams and C-suite officers alike, presented in alphabetical order.

**As You Sow**

**@AsYouSow | Berkeley, California | Founded 1992 | CEO Andrew Behar**

*"Empowering shareholders to change corporations for good."*

Shareholder advocacy leader As You Sow feeds no sacred cows: In January, CEO Andrew Behar posted a marked-up [PDF correction of Larry Fink's](#) much-lauded annual letter to investors.

Is net zero by 2050 part of your corporate policy? As You Sow's reality check: The "overwhelming majority" of the biggest 55 companies have failed to progress on net-zero goals or even made them in the first place.

Did your company make a grand pledge in 2020 to advance social equity? As You Sow scrutinized policies and practices to identify leaders (top: CVS Health) and laggards (bottom: ExxonMobil) for its Racial Justice Scorecard in 2021.

As You Sow's particular focus areas include energy and climate, environment, health and toxicity, social justice and CEO pay. Among recent wins: As You Sow credits itself with influencing commitments shrinking the production of virgin plastic by [Kraft Heinz](#), Church & Dwight, Keurig Dr Pepper, Mondelez International, PepsiCo, Target and Walmart.

The nonprofit publishes its numerous shareholder resolutions on a [page that's easy to filter](#) by companies, from 3M to Macy's to Zillow, and by initiatives, from Anti-Slavery to Methane to Water. [Recent reports](#) included calling out "The 100 most overpaid CEOs" on the one hand, while on the other hand lauding (in a Corporate Knights partnership) the "Clean200" companies leading a clean energy future.

Identifying smoke and mirrors is As You Sow's specialty; one project is using natural language processing to identify whether funds are truly pursuing ESG or are frothing with greenwash. The group's gatekeeping efforts provide a necessary filter in an era of rampant misinformation, disinformation and good intentions executed badly.

## **Blue Green Alliance**

**@BGAlliance | Minneapolis | Founded 2006 | Executive Director Jason Walsh**

*"For America, by America."*

You know the familiar trope of spotted owl-loving treehuggers facing off against job-loving loggers. The Blue Green Alliance, however, is proving that labor groups and environmentalists have more shared interests than not. Blue Green continued a [rich history](#) of green groups and labor interests pairing up, when it emerged in 2006 from a partnership between Sierra Club and United Steelworkers.

Its 13 member organizations today include the Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation and Union of Concerned Scientists, alongside the Utility Workers Union of America, Service Employees International Union and International Union of Painters and Allied Trades. That's about 15 million members and supporters.

Blue Green's platform has three legs: good jobs; clean infrastructure; and fair trade.

The alliance specifies that new jobs in clean transportation, renewables and green chemistry must lead to robust, safe work that supports a family, not mere service gigs without benefits. It envisions rebuilding bridges, railways and roads; reducing methane leaks from natural gas pipelines and cleaning aging water systems. Internationally, Blue Green advocates for trade policies that protect workers and ecosystems.

The nonprofit heavily campaigned for the new \$1 trillion infrastructure law and is making recommendations to fine tune its impending rollouts of clean school buses, electric vehicle charging systems and public transit improvements.

## **Calstart**

**@CALSTART | Pasadena, California | Founded 1992 | President and CEO John Boesel**

*"Accelerating growth of the clean transportation technology industry for a better and more prosperous future."*

As California goes, eventually so does the nation. At least that's been the case with low-emission transportation policies and technologies — which probably no single organization has done more to catalyze than CALSTART.

Calstart launched in 1992 as a research consortium in smoggy southern California. Funneling expertise from the waning Cold War defense industry into transportation technologies to lessen air pollution, Calstart's skunk works developed innovations that became mainstream in cars, in addition to designing market mechanisms and sponsoring legislation to scale them, bringing together otherwise competitive corporate collaborators in the process.

The nonprofit has 282 member companies, including Ford Motor, Proterra and UPS, and claims scores of success stories in public-private collaboration and "co-opetition."

Calstart manages major energy programs for California, including incentives for low-emission trucks and buses; spurring infrastructure funding for zero-emission fleets; and expanding clean transportation to low-income communities. It handles fleet voucher programs in Chicago and New York state for plug-in hybrid or electric trucks and buses. In addition, the nonprofit has worked with the U.S. Army to boost truck efficiency, and it sparked efforts leading to the U.S.-China Race to Zero program to develop zero-emission buses.

The Golden State just reached a record 1 million sales of plug-in electric vehicles, and it plans to reach 1.5 million by 2025. Its energy policies are mirrored by those of the administration of President Joe Biden, whose trillion-dollar infrastructure law includes a \$7.5 billion boon for electric vehicles and \$2.5 billion for electric school buses. CALSTART is charged up and ready to help clean up the climate impacts of cars, buses, trucks and fuels at scale.

## **Center for Political Accountability**

**@CPADisclosure | Washington, D.C. | Founded 2003 | President and Co-founder Bruce Freed**

*"Bring transparency & accountability to corporate political spending."*

It's an open secret that corporations donate to political candidates on both sides of the aisle. But why should a company with a climate-friendly glow fund public servants who empower polluters? The Center for Political Accountability (CPA) is taking names and showing receipts for businesses that publicly promote action on climate while quietly supporting sustainability saboteurs for public office.

"How does your company rank?" The CPA-Zicklin Index of Corporate Political Disclosure and Accountability rates corporations to encourage "a model code of conduct for corporate political spending."

In February, the group attracted widespread attention by calling out the "hollow policies" of 75 corporations that have pledged greenhouse gas reductions — including Citigroup, Microsoft and Walmart — while throwing cash to politicians who undermine climate progress.

CPA examined elections in 2016, 2018 and 2020, during which those companies contributed to elect state attorneys general who later prevented emissions reductions in nine important court cases. The businesses used their treasury money rather than funneling donations through 527s, corporate political action committees (PACs). The court cases included Louisiana vs. Biden No. 2 and Missouri vs. Biden, in which Republican attorneys general sued to prevent the Biden administration from adopting a social cost on carbon.

As public suspicion rises about the sincerity of net-zero carbon and other corporate sustainability commitments, CPA raises the bar for organizations to address the cognitive dissonance in their collective behavior.

## **Clean Air Task Force**

**@cleanaircatf | Boston | Founded 1996 | Executive Director Armond Cohen**

*“Push the technology and policy changes needed to achieve a zero-emissions, high-energy planet at an affordable cost.”*

The world can satisfy the Paris Agreement, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report in early April. That’s in line with the relatively hopeful position of the Clean Air Task Force (CATF), whose pragmatic problem solvers seek to make global net-zero emissions by 2050 a reality.

Its scientists, engineers and policy wonks speak the language of climate feedbacks and tipping points. CATF harnesses technology and policy across a swath of areas including energy systems, transportation and industry, advocating for low-carbon infrastructure to unlock change. Key focuses include reducing methane, capturing carbon, using hydrogen and exploring nuclear energy.

CATF’s focus in the 1990s was "simply" reducing air pollution; now it’s about keeping the planet livable. Nearly three decades ago, its campaigns led to regulations that forced coal plants to reduce emissions.

The organization was among the first more than two decades ago to sound the alarm about "super pollutants" when few others were listening. Recognizing the short life spans of methane and black carbon versus CO2 in the atmosphere, CATF crafted what led to the Global Methane Pledge, by which 11 nations have committed to reduce methane by 30 percent or more by 2030. The nonprofit keeps engaging at the international, national and regional levels to nudge methane policies forward.

To make change in business, CATF engages with companies to help further climate-friendly technologies, yet prioritizes its policy work, noting how laws and regulations help companies to plan ahead and force industries to make far-reaching shifts. CATF has been lauded for its effectiveness and donation-worthiness by Giving Green, Founders Pledge and Vox. Last year it expanded into the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

## **Grid Alternatives**

@Grid | Oakland, California | Founded 2001 | Co-founder and CEO Erica Mackie

*"Making renewable energy technology and job training accessible to underserved communities."*

Grid Alternatives is one of the largest nonprofit solar installers in the United States. Its grassroots approach serves lower-income communities not only by installing low-cost clean energy in households but by providing green jobs in the process.

The organization is a win-win where clean energy and environmental justice meet, with success stories clad in T-shirts and blue jeans offering bottomless feel-good video testimonials from the field across the United States and beyond. Grid Alternatives says it has helped more than 10,000 families establish solar power around the world. One southern California family's energy bill shrank to nothing from \$1,400 a year after the PV panels went up. A single mother in Texas credited her low-cost rooftop solar system with enabling her to support her family. Former indentured servants in Nepal became solar installers through Grid Alternatives' Women in Solar program.

Grid Alternatives programs help people on fixed incomes as well as landlords to benefit from solar power. The organization also administers California's \$120 million Disadvantaged Communities — Single-family Solar Homes (DAC-SASH) program to incentivize low-income communities lower their energy bills.

Grid Alternatives has partnered with corporations and utilities including Southern California Edison, Warner Brothers Entertainment and Wells Fargo, as well as local governments, affordable housing developers and job training organizations. The nonprofit's team-building events enable corporate employees to install solar systems in underserved neighborhoods.

Grid Alternatives' inclusive workforce development programs include real-world experience and networking to help launch careers in solar, including hands-on installation training, Women in Solar opportunities, fellowships through SolarCorps and learning programs for youth.

The nonprofit is exploring free battery storage for energy resiliency for Californians and residents of Tribal lands. And it's partnering with state and regional authorities to promote clean transportation equity.

Beyond its offices in California, Colorado and the mid-Atlantic (Washington, D.C.), Grid Alternatives seeks to expand energy independence for people on North American tribal lands and in Nicaragua, Nepal and Mexico.

## **Indigenous Environmental Network**

**@IENEarth | Bemidji, Minnesota | Founded 1990 | Executive Director Tom BK Goldtooth**

*"Protect the sacredness of Earth Mother from contamination and exploitation by respecting and adhering to Indigenous knowledge and natural law."*

The Gwich'in and the Inupiat people seek to ban fuel extraction forever in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Mississippi River Band of Ojibwe opposes the Line 3 tar sands pipeline. The Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe of Texas fights oil and gas operations in the Permian Basin.

Indigenous resistance, notably by the "water defenders" at Standing Rock, has halted fossil fuel projects that would have released the equivalent of one-fourth of the United States and Canada's combined annual greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN).

The organization's self-described "web of freedom fighters" represents Tribal nations and others across Turtle Island, aka North America. It advocates for Indigenous and other marginalized peoples through a just transition to renewable energy; keeping fossil fuels in the ground; protecting agroecology and fostering food sovereignty.

The coalition evolved 32 years ago from annual Indigenous gatherings where people compared environmental inequities in their communities, which bear the brunt of radiation, mining tailings and other toxic waste from extractive industries.

The group's nonviolent actions, political advocacy and media persistence have elevated its profile. IEN participates in every United Nations Conference of the Parties on Climate Change, and A-list celebrities earlier this year signed IEN's petition against a natural gas pipeline in Wet'suwet'en territory, British Columbia.

IEN opposes techno-fixes and market mechanisms embraced by many mainstream business leaders and policymakers. This includes nature-based solutions, for ceding control of land from frontline communities to corporations. Carbon pricing places "a price on the Earth we breathe, violating Mother Earth and Father Sky." As for carbon capture? It lets polluters keep polluting, IEN maintains.

Indigenous North Americans have withstood five centuries of "an immigrant society" whose "take, make, waste" industrial culture has caused climate chaos. Business leaders who care about a livable planet should set aside conventional Western wisdom and heed the voices of IEN, not only to heal environmental injustices but to find lasting solutions. After all, concepts such as the circular economy, regenerative agriculture and environmental equity grew from the roots of Indigenous, systemic worldviews.

## **Ocean Plastics Leadership Network**

**@O P L N | New York City | Founded 2020 | Executive Director Dave Ford**

*"Activist to industry: Bringing all sides of the ocean crisis to the table."*

Move over, Paris Agreement? There's a new multilateral United Nations environmental deal on the block. The United Nations Environment Program's "End Plastic Pollution" resolution in March called for a legally binding global agreement by the end of 2024 to tackle plastic across its lifecycle.



A relative NGO newcomer, the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network (OLPN) organized the global treaty dialogues held in the year leading up to this commitment. The "activist-to-industry" collaboration counts 110 organizational members. It launched two years ago with 50 corporate and nonprofit members, including Dow and Coca-Cola, Greenpeace and WWF. OPLN swirled into formation out of a 2019 maritime journey in which former media executive Dave Ford led 165 business and nonprofit leaders to witness the Atlantic Garbage Patch.

Those involved with OLPN include allies, frenemies and adversaries alike. Through it, some of the world's biggest companies, and even the American Chemistry Council, eventually agreed on the need for an international plastics treaty. Even so, there's a push and pull between those who emphasize circular design and user models for plastics' entire life cycle over those (ahem, plastic producers) who advocate mostly for better waste management.

OPLN is convening discussions on the "End Plastic" treaty with leaders in Chile, Malaysia, Indonesia, Ghana, Pakistan and the United States. OPLN's leaders warn against falling into the Paris Agreement's traps of inefficiency and excluding communities on the ground. Plastic pollution was already out of control before the spike in medical waste of the COVID-19 pandemic. Can this "Paris Accord for plastics" stanch the flow?

## **Southern Environmental Law Center**

**@SELC | Charlottesville, Virginia | Founded 1986 | Executive Director Jeff Gleason**

*"To protect the basic right to clean air, clean water, and a livable climate; to preserve our region's natural treasures and rich biodiversity; and to provide a healthy environment for all."*

The Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) doesn't let corporations slip through regulatory cracks when they pollute. "Solutions start in the South" is its tagline, recognizing the U.S. region's fragile mix of weak protections for rich natural resources.

The Southeast hosts a disproportionate share of greenhouse gas emissions and environmental injustices. Hugged by the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the region is sun-soaked, yet compared with other parts of the U.S., clean energy adoption is slow, and Southerners pay more for their energy.

Against this backdrop, the SELC seeks to safeguard air, water, land, people and wildlife, one legal case at a time. Its 90 attorneys focus on climate change, clean air and water and environmental justice, from offices in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and the District of Columbia.

Among SELC's triumphs: Its work blocked offshore drilling in the Southeast. SELC led years of federal and state cases that eventually forced utilities to clean up more than 250 million tons



of coal ash pollution. A 2007 Supreme Court victory resulted in Duke Energy reducing coal plant emissions.

These environmental lawyers aren't just opposing things; they're also central to regional and local strategic regional planning efforts, balancing protections for nature with economic expansion.

SELC's solar program since 2015 tackles policy and market barriers to expanding solar energy. In Georgia, that means advocating for net metering. In Virginia, it's supporting power purchase agreements and solar leasing. In Alabama, it's fighting unnecessary utility fees for solar customers.

The nonprofit continues to address the gutting of the Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act under the administration of President Donald Trump. Drinking water for 35 million people remains threatened by Trump's "Dirty Water Rule," according to the SELC.

SELC's ample funding from donors including the Bloomberg Family Foundation enables it to offer legal services for free. It offers proof of sustainability progress despite strong cultural, political and corporate headwinds.

## **Sunrise Movement**

**@sunrisemvmt | Washington, D.C. | Founded 2016 | Co-founder Varshini Prakash**

*"We are the climate revolution."*

Surveys show that businesses with sustainability street cred enjoy an advantage in engaging Millennials and Generation Z as consumers, employees and community stakeholders. Climate-motivated young adults are embodied by the likes of the Sunrise Movement, which in five short years has mobilized youth on climate, winning over progressive allies on Capitol Hill. Its sweeping goals include ending the climate crisis and creating millions of good jobs in the process, building the largest youth political force in the nation's history.

Some 250 black-and-yellow-logo T-shirt-clad Sunrise activists clamored, loudly and peacefully, around Sen. Nancy Pelosi's office in November 2018 to call for a Green New Deal. Fifty-one were arrested. The activism they've inspired has been credited with helping to elect progressive politicians to Congress, including then-U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland (now U.S. Secretary of the Interior), Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rep. Rashida Tlaib and Rep. Ilhan Omar. Biden cited Sunrise for helping give his administration "a mandate for action on COVID, the economy, on climate change, on systemic racism."

Current Sunrise Movement campaigns include a Green New Deal for public housing, "Good Jobs for All" and "Wide Awake" middle-of-the-night protests at politicians' homes. In its "Generation on Fire" actions last September, small bands of Sunrise activists marched great distances, from Paradise, California, to San Francisco (266 miles) and from New Orleans to Houston (400 miles) to raise awareness about the urgency of the climate crisis.

Sunrise has more than 400 hubs across 50 states, and movement "houses" in which recent college graduates cohabitate and agitate for change. It was co-founded in 2016 by Varshini Prakash, an activist credited with contributing to efforts that led her alma mater, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, to divest from fossil fuels in 2017. "I think there's just this overwhelming sense of, where are the adults in the room?" she said in 2019.

As Sunrise matures, can it drive the sustained activism it sees as necessary for long-term change?