



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## University of Maine students win divestment from coal stocks, United States, 2015

- Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement (2010 - )

*Time period notes:* Started in the Fall semester of 2012

September

2012

to: January

2015

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** Orono, Maine

**Location Description:** The main campus of the University of Maine.

### Goals:

UMaine student group Divest UMaine presented demands to the UMS board of trustees: the immediate freezing of all new assets invested in the top 200 fossil fuel companies and their remaining endowments with fossil fuel companies within the next five years.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Divest UMaine members spreading divestment awareness.

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions › UMaine students began signing mass petitions in favor of divestment.

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › UMaine students began sending letters to the University of Maine in support of divestment.

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Divest UMaine sent a declaration to the UMaine Board of Trustees demanding the University to divest.

### Methods in 5th segment:

### Methods in 6th segment:

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Environment

**Group characterization:**

- University of Maine Students

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Brooke Lyons-Justus, Connor Scott, Catherine Fletcher - Divest UMaine

**Partners:**

Student Senate, Students for Environmental Awareness & Sustainability, Multicultural Student Association, USM Greens, Green Team, Maine Students for Climate Justice, Daniel Dinxon - University of Maine sustainability coordinator

**External allies:**

UMaine President Susan Hunter, UMaine Board of Trustee Bonnie Newsom, UMaine Professor of philosophy Doug Allen

**Involvement of social elites:**

not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Divest UMaine

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** 4 months and 20 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

University of Maine Board of Trustees

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Agreed to listen to students but cautioned about the financial consequences of divesting from coal.

**Campaigner violence:**

No campaigner violence

**Repressive Violence:**

No repressive violence.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The decision of UMS to unanimously approve a policy to begin divesting from coal is a clear victory for Divest UMaine

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Divest UMaine formed in December, 2012 at the University of Maine by co-founders Brooke Lyons-Justus, Connor Scott, and Catherine Fletcher. Sparked by a growing disapproval of fossil fuels in the United States along with increased public awareness of global warming, UMaine students, staff, faculty, and alumni formed Divest UMaine and aimed to convince the University of Maine System to freeze assets invested in top 200 fossil fuel companies and to “reinvest in a sustainable, socially responsible alternatives.”

According to Shaun Carland, a junior at the University of Maine and the president of the Students for Environmental Awareness and Sustainability Student Group, Divest UMaine was aiming for the University System to “immediately stop investing in any new fossil fuel companies, and divest what they currently do have invested in fossil fuels.” “It is Divest UMaine’s firm belief that the continued use of fossil fuels will lead to irreparable damages to our atmosphere within a few centuries” and that resulting climate changes will make Earth uninhabitable.

No stranger to radical activism campaigns, in 1982 the University of Maine was “one of the first 10 universities in the United States to pull the system’s principal portfolio money - \$3 million - entirely out of corporations and banks doing business in apartheid South Africa.” The University of Maine Board of Trustees, pressured by a campaign led by the Maine Peace Action Committee, divested its holdings in South Africa in order to better represent their commitment to social change and justice. Like the social movements against apartheid, there has been a growing national movement “encouraging universities’ and college’s endowment managers to withdraw their investments from objectionable causes.” Divest UMaine aimed for a similar message, citing that moving away from fossil fuels is a smart move for the university, both morally and financially.

Although created during the fall semester of 2012, Divest UMaine failed to generate much momentum in its first year of its existence. However, the group and its efforts to push for divestment from fossil fuels began to gain strength in September of the following year when the University of Maine Student Senate endorsed Divest UMaine’s campaign. In order to catch the attention of the University of Maine administration, Divest UMaine began gathering hundreds of signatures on a petition to the University of Maine System board of trustees that eventually helped to open up the conversation between the University and its students, staff, faculty, and alumni. The board of trustees acknowledged the importance of the issue and agreed to reconsider investment opportunities in the future as the research on fossil fuels developed.

On Thursday, February 27, 2014, Divest UMaine officially presented their grievances to the University of Maine System (UMS) Board of Trustees and demanded that they divest fossil fuel related assets. In response to the petition, UMS Board of Trustees Chancellor James Page addressed the community, claiming that the school was committed to sustainability and that the “University of Maine System’s stewardship of the environment is important to the entire community.” Furthermore, Page stated that green portfolios would be analyzed and compared with the university’s standard investment practices. Also, the board looked into the recent divestments made by Unity College, the first college or university in the United States to divest from fossil fuel companies. According to Unity College, “their portfolio had not suffered as a result of divesting from fossil fuels.”

In order to keep pressure on the board of trustees, several demonstrations were held by several different student groups including

Divest UMaine and 350 Maine. On 21 November 2014, almost 30 students staged a mock oil spill in front of the Folger Library on the University of Maine Orono campus. The protesters chanted for two hours, holding signs that read pro-divestment messages, such as “End Fossil Fuel Addiction” and “Divest From Climate Crisis.”

Almost a full year after the official petition from Divest UMaine, the University of Maine System board of trustees unanimously approved a policy to begin divesting from coal. Although the divestment from coal constituted a clear victory for Divest UMaine, the University System only committed to partial divestment from fossil fuels (coal) due to warnings from a 2014 report compiled by the New England Pension Consultants (NEPC). In the report, NEPC advised the University that “the wholesale divestiture of fossil fuel could have an impact on the system’s ability to manage risk, diversify, and seek returns. NEPC also warned of additional costs associated with managing a fossil fuel-free portfolio.”

Fellow Divest UMaine founder, Catherine Fletcher, acknowledged that, although full divestment was not achieved, the University System’s decision to divest from coal was a giant step in the right direction. “Originally we were going for full fossil fuel divestment... We’re going to look at it as a victory because it is a victory. But we’re not going to stop now. The coal is not enough but it was a nice first step.”

## Research Notes

### Influences:

The UMaine students were influenced by previous UMaine students petitioning for the administration to divest from corporations and banks doing business in apartheid South Africa. (1) The success of Divest UMaine influenced many other student campaigns for divestment at other schools such as Stanford. (2)

### Sources:

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### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/fossil-fuel-divestment-movement-2010>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants>

[3] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/local-community-or-neighborhood-level-campaign>