

# **Understanding Climate Change Discourse used by New Zealand's Top Corporate Polluters**

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## **Importance of the Research**

Aotearoa | New Zealand's greenhouse gas emissions have risen 14% between 1990 and 2018 despite global efforts to curb them (Ministry for the Environment, 2024). Unlike many other developed countries, Aotearoa's economic dependence on agriculture uniquely shapes the country's emissions profile (Kennett et al., 2023). This sectoral anomaly and the incorporation of indigenous culture into environmental dialogue complicates the direct applicability of existing climate change discourse (CCD) research to Aotearoa. The current study seeks to close this knowledge gap by answering the question:

“What are the dominant linguistic discourses used by Aotearoa's top corporate polluters in their public communications about climate change?”.

In recent years, climate change denial discourses have been transitioning to climate delay discourses (Si et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2024). Climate delay discourses accept anthropogenic climate change but justify insufficient or stagnated action (Lamb et al., 2020). Understanding these discourses is vital because corporate narratives influence public perception and policy while reinforcing the status quo, allowing only incremental climate action and diverting attention from ongoing environmentally harmful investments.

## **Research Approach**

This research uses corpus-based discourse analysis (CBDA) on climate communications from agricultural, fossil fuel, and steel companies that make up the top corporate polluters. CBDA blends quantitative methodology that analyses patterns in a large corpus with a qualitative methodology to bring in deeper contextual analysis.

## **Key Findings**

Despite widespread acceptance of anthropogenic climate change, corporations of Aotearoa use climate delay discourses to justify slow or insufficient climate action. The agricultural and fossil fuel sectors often use strategic wording or omit critical information to downplay their emissions. For example, fossil fuel companies' emphasis “energy” over “fossil fuel” or “oil” terminology to suggest a clean, progressive image. Agricultural corporations rarely mention “methane” distancing themselves from their main emissions source.

Non-transformative solutions are dominant in communications through intensity based (not actualised) targets, techno-optimistic, and corporate solutionism. Polluters also use discourses to present themselves as societally beneficial through wellbeing, social justice, cultural imagery, and investments in renewables.

## **Conclusion**

This research reveals how Aotearoa's top polluters craft messages that delay meaningful climate action while maintaining a socially responsible appearance. With limited regulation, corporate climate discourse can unduly shape public understanding and policy, masking ongoing harmful practices, and reinforcing the status quo. This study highlights the need for: 1) greater scrutiny and regulation of corporate climate communications; 2) an increased public awareness of how language can obscure real environmental impacts; and 3) further research is required into how indigenous imagery shapes climate discourse in NZ.

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