

Green Activists: Thank Heaven for \$4 Gas

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Green shareholder activists wrangling to get big corporates to clean up their act are celebrating their best year ever. The big reason: high energy prices.

CERES, a group of activist shareholders with about \$5 trillion in holdings, just wrapped up its busiest-ever proxy season. CERES filed [57 shareholder resolutions](#) with big companies urging them to change their ways; almost half agreed to do so without putting it to a vote. And when it came time to vote, CERES says, green ideas mustered record support.

CERES celebrated [Ford Motor Co.'s announcement](#) it would start building more eco-friendly cars, even if plans to [nudge ExxonMobil](#) away from oil and closer to clean energy still fell short this year.

But what's interesting is the shifting emphasis. In [previous years](#), CERES always tried to get companies to deal with the risks (and opportunities) from climate change, arguing that eventual government limits on greenhouse-gas emissions mean it would behoove companies to green themselves now. This year, the shareholders stressed more earthly and immediate issues, first and foremost soaring energy costs.

Said CERES head Mindy Lubber: "By re-thinking their strategies with high energy prices and climate change in mind, these companies will have a distinct competitive advantage in the years ahead." Other CERES activists went further:

"Companies in all sectors need to get ready now to prosper in a world of higher energy costs and carbon constraints. The crisis in the auto industry has shown how quickly business models can become obsolete," said Leslie Lowe, director of the Energy and Environment Program at the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR).

For CERES' brand of shareholder activism, which has convinced plenty of companies to change course but never won a majority when put to a shareholder vote, this subtle shift seems to offer a wider and more promising playing field. Dealing with climate change was always an abstract route to value creation for shareholders; tackling energy costs and a new competitive landscape is a lot more concrete.

Not that that'll be much consolation with the big prize: Higher energy prices are unlikely to faze the boys at ExxonMobil anytime soon.



ExxonMobil chairman and CEO Rex Tillerson (AP)

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