

Shareholder resolution: More than 7,600 Amazon employees demand action on climate change in advance of annual meeting

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A record number of Amazon employees are pressuring the company to get serious about climate change.

More than 7,600 software engineers, managers, designers, and other Amazon workers have signed an open letter to CEO Jeff Bezos and the Amazon board of directors asking the company to adopt a comprehensive climate change plan [1]. For context, that's 2,600 more employees than Amazon's plans to hire at its new Nashville operations hub [2]. It's one of the biggest employee-driven environmental initiatives in history and comes at a time when in-demand tech workers have a lot of leverage over their employers.

"I don't know of any other tech company, or really any other company, that this has happened," said Emily Cunningham, an Amazon UX designer and organizer of the climate change initiative.

The employees want Amazon to adopt a shareholder resolution [3] that would direct the company to prepare a report describing its plan to reduce fossil fuel dependence and prepare for disruptions caused by the climate crisis. The resolution will be up for a vote during the company's annual shareholder meeting in Seattle on Wednesday.

Cunningham is part of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, an employee organization that has been pressuring Amazon to make environmental commitments in line with its competitors for the past few months. The group is planning a press conference outside the shareholder meeting.

In the proxy statement, Amazon's board recommends shareholders vote down the resolution because of the environmental programs and commitments already underway at the company. In February, Amazon announced plans to publish its carbon footprint for the first time this year [4].

"The Board agrees that planning for potential disruptions posed by climate change and reducing company-wide dependence on fossil fuels are important," the proxy statement says. "However, the Board believes that Amazon is already doing this, especially given our commitment to disclose our overall carbon footprint, along with related goals and programs."

In addition to the shareholder resolution, the open letter that the employee group sent to Bezos asks Amazon to make the following commitments:

- Cut carbon emissions in half by 2030 and to zero by 2050
- Completely transition away from fossil fuels

- End custom products built for fossil fuel companies
- Reduce pollution in vulnerable communities
- Lobby for environmental policies
- Protect employees vulnerable to climate disruptions and extreme weather events.

There are 11 shareholder resolutions included in Amazon's annual proxy statement [5], more than any other public company this year. The other resolutions focus on Amazon's controversial facial recognition technology, salary transparency, and other equity issues.

Amazon's carbon footprint is more complex than other big corporations because of its vast and varied business. But the two arms of the company with the biggest power needs — cloud services and package delivery — have competitors making bigger strides toward reducing their environmental impacts.

Google has been powering all offices and data centers with renewable energy since 2017 [6]. Microsoft reached 50 percent renewable energy in 2018 [7] and plans to make it to 100 percent in the next decade. Apple reached that milestone last year [8].

Amazon's biggest retail competitor, Walmart, is also pursuing sustainability objectives. By 2025, Walmart plans to power half of its operations with renewable energy. It has already reached 28 percent.

Amazon has announced several environmental programs amid pressure from employees and shareholders. The company plans to move to 100 percent renewable energy but hasn't set a deadline to reach that goal. In February, Amazon pledged to get half of its package deliveries to a standard of net zero carbon by 2030 as part of a "Shipment Zero" initiative [9].

"That's only for the shipment part of our business," Cunningham said. "It doesn't take into account the data centers through Amazon Web Services which are almost 50 percent fossil fuel-run."

An Amazon spokesperson declined to comment for this story but pointed to the company's sustainability initiatives.

International Shareholders Services and Glass Lewis, the two largest advisers to institutional investors, recommended that Amazon shareholders approve the climate change resolution. Amazon Employees for Climate Justice celebrated the endorsements in a thread on Twitter [10].

Whether the resolution gains traction remains to be seen. Shareholder resolutions are non-binding and most of them do not get approved. But Cunningham is encouraged by the unprecedented level of support for the plan.

"Glass Lewis and ISS have sided with the 7,600 employees on the shareholder resolution," she said. "I'm not sure what that exactly is going to look like but, regardless of the shareholder resolution, I feel like we've already won in many ways."

Monica Nickelsburg

P.S.

- May 21, 2019 at 8:27 am:

<https://www.geekwire.com/2019/7600-amazon-employees-demand-action-climate-change-advance-an-nual-meeting/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://medium.com/@amazonemployeesclimatejustice/public-letter-to-jeff-bezos-and-the-amazon-board-of-directors-82a8405f5e38>

[2] <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/music-city-sings-new-tune-amazon-nashville-become-major-logistics-hub-5000-corporate-jobs/>

[3] <https://ir.aboutamazon.com/static-files/df752652-6580-453d-8d97-4bd3232818f7>

[4] <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/amazon-share-carbon-footprint-1st-time-part-new-shipment-zero-sustainability-initiative/>

[5] <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/amazon-shareholders-seek-moratorium-facial-recognition-sale-s-government-climate-change-action-political-goals/>

[6] <https://sustainability.google/projects/announcement-100/>

[7] <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/microsofts-ambitious-new-environmental-goals-include-shifting-data-centers-70-renewable-energy-2023/>

[8] <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2018/04/apple-now-globally-powered-by-100-percent-renewable-energy/>

[9] <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/amazon-share-carbon-footprint-1st-time-part-new-shipment-zero-sustainability-initiative/>

[10] https://twitter.com/AMZNforClimate/status/1126922811975409664?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1126922811975409664&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fhub.packtpub.com%2Famazon-employees-get-support-from-glass-lewis-and-iss-on-its-resolution-for-amazon-to-manage-climate-change-risks%2F