



This is how the Kochs’ anti-renewable agenda becomes White House policy

Koch-tied officials “got their wish” with Trump’s attacks on climate action, environment.

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President-elect Donald Trump raised eyebrows late last year when he named the head of an obscure right-wing think tank, with close ties to petrochemical billionaires Charles and David Koch, to lead his energy transition team. Since then, officials from the Institute for Energy Research (IER) have been appointed to high-level positions at the Department of Energy where they are playing major roles in implementing pro-fossil fuel, anti-renewable energy policies.

Thomas Pyle, who serves as president of IER and its advocacy arm, the American Energy Alliance (AEA), set the tone by drafting a priority list for the new administration; at the top of the list was withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement.

Soon after Trump took office, newly appointed officials across the federal government started a push to prop up the fossil fuel sector, particularly the coal industry. In the spring, Energy Secretary Rick Perry directed his staff to conduct a study of the U.S. electric grid to determine if renewables were harming traditional baseload generation sources, like coal and nuclear. A former IER official, Travis Fisher, was selected to oversee the study.

A draft of the study leaked last week concluded that renewables pose no threat to the grid. The leaked draft was completed by DOE career staff, and thus is subject to change by Perry and his team of Trump appointees. A DOE spokeswoman told Bloomberg that “those statements as written are not in the current draft.” The report clarifies that the spokeswoman “wouldn’t say they are incorrect, just the draft is ‘constantly evolving.’”

In an April memo, Perry wrote that pro-renewable energy regulations issued by past U.S. administrations “threaten to undercut the performance of the grid” and have caused “the erosion of critical baseload resources” derived from coal and nuclear energy. Since Perry ordered the study, numerous analyses and reports have been published rejecting that notion.

Rick Perry called out for ‘thinly disguised’ attempt to undermine renewable energy
Former Koch-funded think tank official selected to lead DOE study.thinkprogress.org

“From the beginning, all signs pointed to Perry’s so-called study as a piece of coal power propoganda,” Jim Marston, vice president of clean energy for the Environmental Defense Fund, wrote in a blog post.

Fisher has been clear about his disdain for policies that encourage the growth of renewable energy: In 2015, he wrote a report on the nation's power grid in which he recommended that policymakers eliminate the EPA's Clean Power Plan and Mercury and Air Toxics Standards; the federal production tax credit for wind energy; state renewable energy standards; and net metering incentives for rooftop solar.

"It's no coincidence that, now that Donald Trump is in the White House, some of the same clean energy policies that Fisher targeted for attack in his 2015 grid study for IER are now being rolled back," Dave Anderson, the Energy and Policy Institute's policy and communications manager wrote in a report.

IER receives funding specifically to produce research papers that attack renewable energy and promote fossil fuels, according to Jesse Coleman, a researcher with Greenpeace USA's investigations team. Other right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute have a wide array of financial backers; IER's funding circle appears to be much smaller.

With Koch brothers-linked groups serving as its major funders, IER "can get away with more extreme views, especially on renewable energy, than either Heritage or the American Enterprise Institute does," Coleman explained.

IER plays "a very valuable and preconceived function within this greater Koch network."

In May, Trump appointed Daniel Simmons, IER's former vice president for policy who has questioned the value of promoting renewable energy sources, to oversee the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy. Simmons also held a top position at AEA, which advocated for the office he now oversees at DOE to be eliminated.

Simmons is the highest-profile former IER employee to land a job in the Trump administration. Prior to joining IER, he served as director of the natural resources task force at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a right-wing group that drafts industry-friendly model legislation for policymakers.

Another former AEA staff member, Alex Fitzsimmons, is now a senior adviser in the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, E&E News reported earlier this month. While at AEA, Fitzsimmons served as manager of policy and public affairs where he wrote blog posts on "green energy cronyism" and spotlighting Jay Leno's criticisms of ethanol.

With the financial backing of tax-exempt organizations linked to the Kochs and other right-wing donor groups, IER has been promoting its pro-coal, anti-renewable energy agenda for years. Founded in 1989, IER is a small think tank, but its tentacles spread far and wide among other right-wing groups. AEA was formed in 2008. Between 2010 and 2014, IER and AEA received more than \$5 million from Koch-tied funds.

[This Koch-backed group invites you to celebrate fossil fuels on Earth Day](#)
[The contest is designed to "showcase the awesomeness of fossil fuels."thinkprogress.org](#)

IER plays “a very valuable and preconceived function within this greater Koch network, which is to provide academic ammunition for the other groups that fight for the Koch brothers and the oil and gas agenda writ large,” Coleman said in an interview.

“While they seem small, they’re part of the much larger Koch network that has always given them an echo chamber and increased their reach,” he continued. “And that’s the reason we see them with such seemingly outsized influence now.”

IER founder and CEO Robert Bradley, Jr. is an adjunct scholar at the Koch-founded and funded Cato Institute and the Koch-funded Competitive Enterprise Institute. Bradley previously served as director of policy analysis at Enron, where he wrote speeches for company founder Ken Lay. The company collapsed into bankruptcy in late 2001 with several officials, including CEO Jeff Skilling, serving prison sentences.

A ThinkProgress review of IER and AEA’s funders (according to data provided by Conservative Transparency, Guidestar, and CitizenAudit) revealed that since 2008, its donations included at least:

Institute for Energy Research

- \$1,550,000 from the Marshall Heritage Foundation, a Louisiana-based nonprofit organization formed with a portion of the fortune of oil tycoon J. Howard Marshall II, who owned a huge stake in Koch Industries.
- \$744,000 from DonorsTrust, an affiliated donor-advised fund that sends donations from supporters to non-governmental organizations that promote limited government and free enterprise. According to the Center for Media and Democracy, the Koch brothers and “other ultra-wealthy industrial ideologues appear to be cloaking an untold amount of their donations to conservative political outlets” by using the Donors Capital Fund and DonorsTrust as pass-throughs. A 2015 investigation by the Guardian revealed that the two secretive organizations had directed about \$125 million over three years to spread disinformation about climate science and fight the Obama administration’s Clean Power Plan.
- \$250,000 from the PacifiCorp Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Pacific Power, an electric utility that provides power to almost 750,000 customers in Oregon, Washington, and California.
- \$200,000 from The Searle Freedom Trust, which consists of wealth inherited from G.D. Searle & Company, a company that created the artificial sweetener aspartame marketed as NutraSweet. The foundation also has funded Americans for Prosperity, the American Enterprise Institute, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Heartland Institute, and many other right-wing groups.
- \$160,000 from the American Petroleum Institute, the influential lobbying group for the oil and gas industry.

- \$151,000 from the Bachman Foundation, the foundation for Nate Bachman—a venture capitalist with a history in synthetic fuels—that funds many conservative groups.
- \$67,000 from the Carleton Speed Family Foundation, a Houston-based organization that gives primarily to animal welfare groups and groups that provide assistance to women who are victims of domestic violence.
- \$60,000 from The Challenge Foundation, an organization that is principally focused on charter schools and school choice. John Bryan, a retired executive and board member of Georgia Gulf who has close ties to David and Charles Koch, reportedly has given \$30 million to the Challenge Foundation.
- \$50,000 from the Chase Foundation of Virginia, a private foundation of investor Derwood Chase, who gives to many other right-wing groups, including the Heartland Institute, FreedomWorks, and the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity.
- \$50,000 from The Randolph Foundation, a foundation that gives to many other right-wing groups, including the American Enterprise Institute and the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity.
- \$43,091 from the Charles Koch Institute, a Charles Koch’s anti-government “educational” arm created from the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation in September 2011.

American Energy Alliance

- \$3,867,500 from Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce, a group now known as the Freedom Partners that describes itself as a chamber of commerce that promotes the benefits of free markets and a free society. Koch Industries issued a press release stating that Freedom Partners is legally separate from the corporation but serves as “the Koch brothers’ secret bank,” according to Politico.
- \$1,345,000 from American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers for consulting work conducted by AEA.
- \$1,114,960 from American Encore (formerly known as the Center to Protect Patient Rights), a non-profit group that funneled more than \$182 million in undisclosed donations to right-wing advocacy groups from 2009 to 2012, including the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity.
- \$604,000 from Wellspring Committee Inc., a Virginia group founded in 2008 “with the help of conservative donors in the network led by billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch,” according to a report by the Center for Responsive Politics.

Prior to joining IER, Pyle worked as a registered lobbyist for Koch Industries and served as director of federal affairs for Koch Industries from 2001 through 2005. Pyle also worked as policy analyst for then-House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-TX), who ranked among the top recipients of oil and gas industry funds during his time in Congress.

Charles and David Koch took over Koch Industries from their father, who founded the company in 1940, and have used their family fortune to build a right-wing political network. CREDIT: AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki

The Republican Party's move further to the right, especially on energy and environmental issues, has political observers confused about how to describe its major players. Elliott Negin, a senior writer at the Union of Concerned Scientists, pointed out that the Washington Post called Simmons a "conservative scholar" when reporting his DOE appointment. As a veteran of the Koch brothers' "climate science denier network," the more accurate description of Simmons would be "fossil fuel industry propagandist," Negin wrote.

Given its small size—it lists just nine current scholars and staff members on its website—IER cannot provide the Trump administration with an endless supply of anti-regulation energy officials. Industry trade groups and other right-leaning research organization are helping to fill the ranks of Trump's energy and environmental team.

For energy and environment policy, though, IER is playing an important role in the Trump administration. "IER adheres to a very extreme brand of 'free market' ideology. As usually happens with other groups in the Koch network, they will specifically attack the enemies of Koch Industries' profit centers. So... they attack solar and wind," Coleman said.

During the presidential transition, the IER-AEA memo written by Pyle predicted that the Clean Power Plan would be withdrawn by the Trump administration. "Pyle, IER, and AEA soon got their wish," Anderson wrote. "Trump signed an executive order that began the process of reviewing the Clean Power Plan during his first 100 days in the White House."

With Pyle serving as Trump's energy transition team chief, IER laid the groundwork for the energy policies that are now being amplified by the administration, Coleman said. Blaming renewable energy for a decline in the coal and nuclear industries, for instance, was a talking point that clearly came from IER.

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John Coequyt, global climate policy director for the Sierra Club, contends that the Trump administration is having trouble finding qualified people to fill appointed positions at DOE, which has created a vacuum for a small organization like IER.

"It's such a crazy place that [other Republicans] don't want to be a part of it," Coequyt said. "We don't know what's going to happen with these [IER] guys or whether they are ultimately going to be successful. It's hurting them that they're such zealots."

Release of the grid study ordered by Rick Perry has been delayed from its original late-June deadline. According to the leaked version of the study released last week, wind and solar power do not pose a significant threat to the reliability of the U.S. power grid, contradicting statements by Perry. The conclusions in the final study, after DOE's political appointees get a chance to review it, will represent the key first test for IER's influence on policies related to promoting fossil fuels and undercutting renewable energy sources.

