

Kansas congressman's ties to Koch Industries examined

Pompeo: Agenda always has been clear to voters

By DAN EGGEN
The Washington Post

Published:
Friday, March 25, 2011 1:05 PM CDT

WASHINGTON — When Mike Pompeo needed funding for a Wichita aerospace company, one of the places he and his partners went for help was Koch Industries, a hometown firm that is among the world's largest privately held corporations.

Last year, Pompeo turned to Koch for help again — this time to support his successful campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Pompeo received \$80,000 in donations from Koch and its employees, making him the top recipient of Koch-related money in the 2010 elections.

The contributions put the House freshman in the middle of a broad partisan battle over the role of corporate money in U.S. politics, which gained urgency in the aftermath of last year's Supreme Court ruling allowing unfettered election spending.

President Barack Obama and other Democrats repeatedly have criticized the decision as giving unfair advantage to business interests, a claim that Republicans disputed.

Often mentioned in the debate over corporate political influence is Koch Industries, a conglomerate with holdings in oil, paper and other interests, owned by brothers Charles and David Koch, whose combined net worth is estimated at \$44 billion.

The longtime conservatives have told supporters that they plan to spend tens of millions of dollars on the 2012 elections, and they have come under attack from Democrats for supporting union-busting Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican.

Now liberal groups have begun turning their ire toward Pompeo, who hired a former Koch Industries lawyer as his chief of staff and proposed legislation in his first weeks in office that could benefit many of Koch's business interests.

The measures included amendments approved in the House budget bill to eliminate funding for two major Obama administration programs — a database cataloguing consumer complaints about unsafe products and an Environmental Protection Agency registry of greenhouse-gas polluters.

Both have been listed as top legislative priorities for Koch Industries, which has spent more than \$37 million on Washington lobbying since 2008, according to disclosure records.

"It's the same old story — a member of Congress carrying water for his biggest campaign contributor," said Mary Boyle, of Common Cause, a liberal-leaning group that has spearheaded protests against the Kochs.

"I don't know how you make the argument to your constituents that it's in their interests to defund the EPA or a consumer database."

"I have run two small businesses in Kansas and I have seen how government can crush entrepreneurship," said Pompeo, who is married, with one son.

"That's why I ran for Congress. It just so happens that there are a lot of people in south-central Kansas who agree with me on that."

Burdett Loomis, a University of Kansas professor of political science, said that "almost any Republican legislator from Wichita is going to be very, very solicitous of the Kochs. They're major constituents, major employers and major money."

But, he said, Pompeo's ties seem to stand out.

"I'm sure he would vigorously dispute this, but it's hard not to characterize him as the congressman from Koch," Loomis said.

Pompeo, 47, is a California native who attended the U.S. Military Academy — where he finished first in his class — and Harvard Law School, before working at the Washington law firm Williams & Connolly.

In the late 1990s, Pompeo joined three buddies from his West Point days to form Thayer Aerospace in Wichita, a specialized machining company that sought financing for an expansion.

The investors included Koch Venture Capital, an arm of the oil-and-gas conglomerate.

Pompeo and his aides said Koch's investment amounted to less than 2 percent of the total.

(The details of the transaction are not available because Thayer, which since has been renamed, was privately held.)

Pompeo went on to head a Wichita oil-rig firm, Sentry International, before his run for Congress.

The Center for Responsive Politics estimated Pompeo's wealth at \$521,000, slightly below average for the relatively wealthy freshman class in the House.

In addition to contributions from Koch's political action committee and employees, Pompeo was supported in the



general election, according to press reports, by Americans for Prosperity, a tea-party-affiliated Washington, D.C., group whose foundation is chaired by David Koch.

Pompeo won handily, beating Democrat Raj Goyle with 59 percent of the vote.

Koch Industries spokeswoman Melissa Cohlma said in a statement that the company supported Pompeo "because we believe he will be a champion for fiscal responsibility, limited government and free markets, all of which are critical to the success and survival of our nation."

Mark Chenoweth, the lawmaker's chief of staff, previously worked in Koch Industries' general counsel's office, where he focused on "government affairs compliance," according to Pompeo aides. He was not a registered lobbyist.

Chenoweth also worked as counsel to Consumer Product Safety Commissioner Anne Northup, a former GOP congresswoman who opposes the product-safety database targeted by Pompeo's recent legislation.

The database, which went live March 11, is slated to make public thousands of complaints about safety problems with products ranging from table lamps to baby strollers.

Koch paid an outside lobbying firm \$220,000 to lobby against the database, along with other legislation, in 2008, records showed.

Rachel Weintraub, senior counsel at the Consumer Federation of America, said Koch and other opponents are "fighting to preserve the status quo, because the status quo has been very successful for manufacturers and others in keeping safety information out of the public eye."

But Pompeo said he agreed with industry groups that the idea is ripe for abuse, including the danger that false allegations will spread about good products.

He also said his amendment forbidding the EPA from implementing a pollution registry would help save jobs and rein in a bureaucracy that has exceeded its mandate under the Clean Air Act.

The freshman lawmaker said his views on those and other issues sprang from a long interest in libertarian and conservative thought, first formed at age 15, when he read Ayn Rand's novel, "The Fountainhead."

Before running for office, Pompeo served as an unpaid trustee at the Flint Hills Public Policy Institute — now the Kansas Policy Institute — formed by devotees of the libertarian Cato Institute, which has received millions of dollars from the Kochs through the years.

Pompeo said that while he has met Charles and David Koch, he does not know them well and does not consult with them on legislation.

"It should surprise no one that I'm out arguing for small government, reduced spending and getting our financial house in order, along with reasonable regulations and no more," Pompeo said. "What I'm trying to do is pretty straightforward."

Editor's note: Washington Post staff researcher Lucy Schackelford contributed to this report.