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Right-Wing Groups Get Overheated on Climate Questions

By Senator Sheldon Whitehouse

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In late February, Sen. Barbara Boxer, Sen. Ed Markey, and I sent a letter to 100 companies, trade groups, and other organizations affiliated with the fossil fuel industry asking whether they spent money to support climate research. That letter provoked a torrent of criticism from conservative groups and publications mischaracterizing our motives and muddling our message. I'd like to set the record straight.

So why did we do this? Because we know that financial incentives can affect behavior. That's why politicians have to disclose their political contributors and amounts, any nonpolitical gifts and benefits they receive, and even their personal financial information. That's why regulatory agencies and scientific journals request scientific submissions to make plain who funded the work. That's why expert witnesses' funding sources are relevant in court proceedings. And that's why Upton Sinclair said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

We also know that industries whose products cause harm have a playbook, to keep safety regulations at bay by funding scientists who foment uncertainty about what are in fact well-established health or safety risks. Champions of this playbook include the tobacco industry, whose campaign to mislead the public about the health effects of tobacco was so fraudulent it was determined in federal court to be a racketeering enterprise. And the lead paint industry shut down its Lead Industry Association rather than answer questions under oath in a court proceeding. The recent documentary *Merchants of Doubt*, based on the book of the same name, examines this corporate strategy.

Finally, we know that a sizable network of front organizations with innocent-sounding names has emerged to propagate the baloney science. This phenomenon has been well documented by -- among others -- Drexel University's Professor Robert Brulle, whose follow-the-money analysis

diagrams the complex flow that industry persistently tries to obscure. If it's important enough for the industry to hide, it's important enough for you to know.

The specific disclosure that prompted our letter involved Willie Soon, a scientist who consistently published papers downplaying the role of carbon emissions in climate change. It came to light that he had received more than half of his funding from oil and electric utility coal interests -- more than \$1.2 million. Every new grant since 2002 came from oil and coal interests or through a front group called Donors Trust that funnels oil and coal money. So we sent our letter.

And then came the torrent from the right: It's a "witch hunt," said the far-right Heartland Blog -- "what fascists do." We are "ethically challenged ... mental midgets," said Heartland Institute's president. (Heartland is the group that put up billboards comparing climate scientists to the Unabomber.) The right-wing John Locke Foundation says the letter is "trying to McCarthyite us." The Washington Times called us "climate change Torquemadas." The Wall Street Journal claimed we were "trying to silence" the other side, though it wasn't clear how they'd be silenced by simply having to reveal the source of their funding.

Lastly, we were accused by the Cato Institute of -- God forbid -- having "a widespread faith ... in government's ability to solve problems."

Let's be clear: No one is saying the industry "scientists" should be silenced, just that the public should know if they are being paid by the very industries that stand to lose or gain from their research.

It is ironic that industries whose front groups accuse us of bullying are themselves pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into elections, for the plainly avowed purpose of threatening and punishing elected officials who dare to cross them and acknowledge the dangers of carbon-driven climate change. Americans for Prosperity, a Koch brothers venture, has said that Republicans who support action on climate change will be put at a "severe disadvantage" in the 2016 elections -- no small threat, given the Koch brothers' subsequent pledge to spend \$900 million in that election cycle. (We also know that the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation gave at least \$230,000 to Willie Soon.) Against a \$900-million campaign threat and a stable of paid-for scientists, our efforts are a raindrop of transparency against a torrent of swirling industry propaganda.

The stakes in this debate -- for both our planet and our people -- are high. Is climate denial "science," a racketeering enterprise, or something in between? A little transparency on the part of the fossil-fuel industry and its supporters to ensure a fair debate based on a common set of scientific facts is the very least we should ask.