



Oil and Tobacco: The Same Researchers Swayed Public Opinion on Smog and Cigarettes

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Oil and tobacco are often linked by activists as embodying the same obfuscating strategies to market and develop products that are harmful to public health. While the oil industry denies the comparison, a new examination of old documents reveals links that go back decades.

As reported in *Scientific American*, the link between Big Oil and Big Tobacco goes back more than six decades to the 1950s, when both industries began to use the same scientific experts and public relations firms to combat negative images of cigarette smoking and smog, including global warming caused by burning fossil fuels.

Oil And Tobacco – The Links

The links between the two industries come naturally. Gas stations were and still are among the largest sellers of cigarettes. Conversely, cigarette sales form the largest percentage of gas station retail figures. Historically, there were many joint advertising and marketing campaigns that targeted both customer bases. Tobacco companies turned to oil companies for their expertise in what is called mass spectrometry, a laboratory technique used to test for the chemical composition of smog and other substances.

An article in *Scientific American* cites documents currently stored at the University of California, San Francisco that detail links between the two industries. Those documents, consisting of publicly available files, were recently the subject of an analysis by the Washington, D.C.-based Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL). CIEL President Carroll Muffett is blunt in an interview with the *Huffington Post*.

“Tobacco companies got their playbook from the oil industry.”

Hill & Knowlton Inc., a New York City-based public relations firm, represented key players in both the oil and tobacco industries from 1956 on. John Hill, the firm’s founder, sat on meetings of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee.

Another link comes in the person of Theodor Sterling, a professor of mathematics who was paid by both Phillip Morris and Ethyl Corp., a company jointly owned by General Motors Corporation and Standard Oil, for research studies that showed smoking and lead in petroleum products in a favorable light.

Documents showed that the toxic effects of cigarette smoke and petroleum fumes had been studied as early as the 1950s, although both the oil and tobacco industries attempted to downplay those risks until relatively recently.

The Stanford Research Institute, which has been called SRI International since splitting from Stanford University in 1970, forms yet another clear link between oil and tobacco. The Institute received funding from both industries and produced multiple reports that downplayed the risks of the petroleum industry and attempted to posit alternate theories on how smog was formed.

The Guardian calls the strategy a “misinformation campaign,” a concerted effort that paid groups \$31 million to counter the growing body of research that proved the harmful effects of the oil industry on human health and the environment by offering alternate theories and sowing the seeds of doubt. *The Guardian* cites Exxon, Koch Industries, Peabody Energy, and many others as funding the same groups for the same reason. The Heartland Institute, Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, George Marshall Institute, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and Manhattan Institute are just a few of the think tanks funded by both the Koch Industries and ExxonMobil.

Oil And Tobacco – Taking Legal Action And The Blowback

CIEL’s current focus is “Smoke & Fumes,” a project that examines the links between the oil and tobacco industries. The organization is looking to help provide proof for the legal case against the oil industry by showing how the petroleum industry has known about the risks of global warming and climate change for decades and worked actively to minimize that knowledge. The goal is to prosecute the big oil industry players under racketeering laws, a move similar to the historic – and successful – 1999 suit that was launched against tobacco industry giants Phillip Morris and others.

Such legal action is getting a mixed response from legislators in the United States. *Climate Wire* reports that House Republicans subpoenaed the New York and Massachusetts attorneys general on Wednesday, July 13, along with several environmental groups in relation to documents filed for the purposes of an ongoing investigation of Exxon Mobil Corp. at the state level. The original investigation is focusing on whether or not the oil industry giant deceived its shareholders, potential investors, and the public about the effects of climate change.

The subpoena, however, was issued by Lamar Smith (R-TX), the chairman of the House Science Committee, along with Republican colleagues. It cites New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, claiming the two were violating Exxon’s First Amendment rights and colluding with environmental groups in the ongoing prosecution.

The oil industry reacted with a negative PR blast of their own. *Energy In Depth*, a petroleum industry blog, called the move a “most desperate pitch” and a “desperate bid for relevance” by the #ExxonKnew campaign that is seeking to bring the oil giant to the courtroom to answer those charges.

Big Oil and Big Tobacco will continue to find themselves at the forefront of environmental law activists as more and more evidence emerges.