

# The Intercept

## Coal Giant Provided Secret Financing To Group Challenging Climate Lawsuits

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In 2018, a new group appeared seemingly out of nowhere and immediately took aim at the recent wave of lawsuits filed by state attorneys general designed to hold major fossil fuel companies responsible for allegedly misleading investors and customers about the true risk of carbon pollution.

“The global warming lobby has gone too far this time,” declared the innocuously named group, Government Accountability and Oversight, in a video posted on its website. GAO claimed that the lawsuits, which target Exxon Mobil, Shell Oil, and Chevron, among other corporations, represent a form of government overreach and that prosecutors are colluding with activist interest groups in an unethical manner.

GAO, which is run as a for-profit company and foundation, does not disclose its donors nor does it provide much information about its origins. But on Saturday, a bankruptcy court in southern Ohio released a filing revealing that the organization received three donations totaling \$300,000 from Murray Energy, the largest privately held coal-mining company in the United States. The first payment was made on June 7, 2018, just one month after GAO announced its intention to “expose” the litigation effort against energy companies.

That a secretive group working to defend the fossil fuel industry is financed by Murray Energy may come as no surprise.

Bob Murray, the billionaire founder of Murray Energy, a prolific GOP donor, and early supporter of President Donald Trump, is an outspoken critic of environmental regulations and activist groups. Murray’s influence over the administration, including the push to unravel Environmental Protection Agency rules on carbon emissions and exit the Paris climate accords, is well documented. Even the current chief of the EPA, Andrew Wheeler, is a former lobbyist for Murray.

GAO and Murray Energy did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The company has provided over \$3.8 million in campaign contributions to a range of federal politicians over the last five years, according to the Federal Election Commission. That figure, however, appears to be only part of the story in terms of the company’s influence over the political debate.

In October, following a precipitous drop in coal demand, Murray's company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, forcing the firm to disclose its recent history of payments to outside political entities. As part of the company's restructuring process, it filed a statement of financial affairs, which lists creditors and liabilities, as well as a list of recent charitable donations and grants, which revealed the payments to GAO, among many other new revelations about the coal company's hidden hand in the climate change debate.

Murray Energy showered donations to several think tanks focused on questioning the link between human activity and global warming, providing grants to groups such as the Heartland Institute, which once sponsored billboards comparing those who accept climate change to the Unabomber. The Ohio-based coal giant gave \$30,000 to the Heartland Institute in March of last year, shortly after the group announced a campaign to save coal companies on the brink of closure, followed by another \$100,00 in contributions in the months that followed.

Other think tanks listed in the filing as having received money from Murray Energy include the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, a group that claimed "there is no scientific consensus though that global warming is man-caused"; the Competitive Enterprise Institute, which briefs lawmakers on how the science behind climate change is a "hoax"; the Cato Institute, the Charles Koch-founded think tank that has long sponsored prominent climate change deniers; and the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, which argues for the "many benefits" of increasing carbon emissions. ("Atmospheric carbon dioxide is the *elixir of life*," one pamphlet reads. Emphasis in the original.)

The filing lists nearly a dozen similar payments to right-wing organizations that do not disclose donors. Murray Energy provided \$130,000 to "Hardworking Ohioians Inc.," a mysterious for-profit group, which revealed no information about its donors, tied closely to Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder, and aired advertisements last year to maintain the Republican majority in the legislature. Another \$50,000 was spent in support of FreedomWorks, a grassroots group that mobilizes public support for rolling back EPA regulations. Judicial Watch, a GOP-aligned investigative nonprofit, is also a beneficiary of Murray Energy money.

"The bankruptcy filing confirms what environmentalists have long suspected about Murray Energy's connections to a network of special-interest groups that have worked to manufacture doubt about climate change and attack climate scientists and activists," said David Anderson, communications and policy manager for the Energy and Policy Institute, a watchdog group.

Bankruptcy filings have provided a unique opportunity for the public to better understand the political agenda of powerful corporate interests, which typically shroud sensitive donations through nondisclosing entities. The sudden collapse earlier this year of Cloud Peak Energy, a Wyoming-based coal firm, revealed several donations to climate change denial groups. In 2015, The Intercept reported on another wave of coal bankruptcies, which revealed ties between coal firms to a subterranean network of groups dedicated to blocking environmental reform.

The bankruptcy of Alpha Natural Resources three years ago, for instance, showed secret payments to Chris Horner, a former lobbyist who had hounded climate scientists in an attempt to

discredit their work. The disclosure was the first time Horner and his nonprofit, the Free Market Environmental Law Clinic, had been directly tied to the fossil fuel industry.

Horner is now onto new projects. Along with several other lawyers, he is a co-founder of Government Accountability and Oversight.