

Here's How Much Money The Mercer Family Donated To Climate Misinformation Groups In 2016

Zajra Hirji

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The Mercer family, the secretive GOP megadonors with [ties to the alt-right](#), in 2016 funded several groups that deny climate change is a problem, tax filings obtained by BuzzFeed News reveal.

The Mercer Family Foundation, funded by hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer and directed by his daughter Rebekah, gave \$150,000 to CO2 Coalition in 2016, making the foundation the top donor of this small, Virginia-based nonprofit that promotes the benefits of climate pollution.

The Mercers also gave \$125,000 to the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, a group that questions the link between rising greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and global warming.

The Mercers have previously funded groups with some ties to climate misinformation. But these two organizations are solely focused on climate science — denying that fossil fuels drive global warming or that climate change has potentially dire impacts.

“These grants show a distinct interest in climate for the first time,” said Kert Davies, founder and director of the Climate Investigations Center (CIC), a watchdog group that obtained the tax filings and shared them with BuzzFeed News. CIC obtained [the Mercer filing](#) through a state information request and the [CO2 Coalition one](#) by simply asking the group for it.

These donations, which have not been previously reported, were on top of about \$4 million that the Mercer family donated to groups that, although not solely focused on climate, do deny man-made climate change or oppose government action on curbing carbon emissions, including: the Media Research Center (\$2 million), the Heartland Institute (\$800,000), the Heritage Foundation (\$500,000), the Cato Institute (\$300,000), the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (\$200,000), and the Oregon Institute for Science and Medicine (\$200,000).

Of the \$19 million total the Mercers gave to 44 nonprofits in 2016, about 23% went to groups working at least partly on climate misinformation. (The foundation also gave [\\$625,000 to the American Museum of Natural History](#) in New York, where Rebekah Mercer is a board member.)

This means the same year the powerful conservative donors were spending more than \$20 million on the Trump campaign and other Republican candidates, they were also supporting organizations seeding doubt about mainstream climate science.

Trump has repeatedly questioned whether man-made climate change is real. This skepticism is shared by many of his top cabinet members, including Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt and Department of Energy Secretary Rick Perry. The administration has threatened to withdraw the US from the Paris climate agreement, excised climate information on government websites, and rolled back the Clean Power Plan and other Obama-era regulations aimed at curbing emissions.

This rapid deregulatory effort was cheered at the Heartland Institute's climate denial conference last spring, which was attended by Robert and Rebekah Mercer. It was also the theme of the group's first-ever "America First Energy Conference" in Houston months later. Both meetings drew Trump officials, another sign of their growing relevance and reach.

"They are responsible for Trump's denial and they take credit for it," Davies said. "They are very proud he's saying what they are saying."

Between 2008 and 2016, the Mercer Family Foundation gave nearly \$6 million to Heartland. Its annual funding ranged from \$100,000 in 2015 to \$1 million in 2008, with \$800,000 in 2016. Heartland declined to comment on its donors.

The Mercers have also donated to groups that have sponsored Heartland's big conferences, or sent speakers or attendees to those events. Take the Cato Institute, for example. The think tank, which describes itself as "dedicated to principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace," got \$300,000 from the Mercers in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Similarly, the Mercer family has given the Heritage Foundation \$500,000 each year between 2013 and 2016.

Rebekah Mercer and a spokesperson for the family did not respond to requests for comment. Spokespeople from the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation said the groups do not comment on donors.

The CO2 Coalition is a relatively new member to the climate denial network. It was formed in 2015, but its leaders have long been in the field and have connections to Cato, Heartland, and these other groups.

In addition to its \$150,000 from the Mercer family in 2016, the CO2 Coalition received \$132,000 from the Sarah Scaife Foundation, as well as \$50,000 from each of several groups: the Searle Freedom Trust, the Thomas W. Smith Foundation, the Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Achelis and Bodman Foundation.

All of these foundations have ties to the spread of climate misinformation, according to Robert Brulle, a Drexel University professor who has mapped the financial connections of climate misinformation groups from 2003 to 2010.

"I think it's important that people understand how concentrated wealth can systematically influence the political process," Brulle told BuzzFeed News. "This is plutocracy."

When asked about its funding, William Happer, who is on CO2 Coalition's board of directors, told BuzzFeed News by email, "The mission of the CO2 Coalition is to educate the public that increased atmospheric levels of CO2 will benefit the world. We are grateful for any financial or moral support of our mission."