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Thrown off the gravy train

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The Environmental Protection Agency's gravy train just ain't what she used to be. Green groups are awestruck, agog and maybe even aghast at the news that the Trump administration has put a political operative to work vetting applications for EPA grants worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

John Konkus, who was Donald Trump's campaign chairman in Leon County, Florida, last year, now, according to The Washington Post, "reviews every award [the EPA] gives out, along with every grant solicitation before it goes out."

Green groups are discovering that Donald Trump is not the same president as Barack Obama, whose EPA routinely engaged with them in corrupt deals flavored with an excess of sugar and grease.

The EPA had been awarding millions of dollars to environmental groups that could collect the swag by filing a law suit against the agency. "When the EPA settles or loses those suits, it then awards the groups millions more in attorneys' fees under the Equal Access to Justice Act," Walter Olson of the Cato Institute says.

"The EPA isn't harmed by these suits," explains Jeffrey Holmstead, who headed the EPA's air-pollution office in the George W. Bush administration and is under consideration now for the No. 2 post at the agency. "Often, the law suits [demand] things the EPA wants to do anyway. By inviting a lawsuit and then signing a consent degree, the agency gets legal cover from the political heat." It's a battle that can be traced back to the earliest days of the Reagan administration, when conservatives urged the president to "defund the Left." The Gipper tried, but the political climate was frigid.

"Unless conservatives can break the moral monopoly enjoyed by proponents of expanded government power," the Heritage Foundation observed in 1981, "any effort to reform federal domestic policies is likely to be reduced to the level of tinkering."

Heritage urged the Reagan administration to "limit the circumstances under which grants and contracts can go to groups organized primarily for lobbying and advocacy."

In the 35 years since then, left-wing lobbying and advocacy groups have multiplied like kudzu.

Liberal groups resisting the defunding argued that imposing lobbying and advocacy restrictions on organizations receiving federal funds would unfairly prohibit lobbying with money raised independently. But money is fungible, and the money that environmental and other left-wing groups collect frees other cash to pay lobbyists. The flow of gravy is not interrupted.

Mr. Konkus, now an administrator in the EPA public affairs office, has so far canceled grants worth \$2 million, including, for telling example, \$20,000 for a one-day workshop on what to do about bedbugs in Flint, Mich.

Canceling a workshop (and instructions in how to operate the machinery of a spray can of insecticide) was good news for bedbugs, but only 1 percent of such grants made since Scott Pruitt assumed command of the EPA in February have been canceled. The cancellation nevertheless set off alarm bells among green groups and their allies within and outside the EPA who decry “politicizing” the grant-award process. Too bad for them, but politics is what Washington is about.

A spokeswoman at the agency says the review process is designed “to ensure funding is in line with the agency’s mission and policy priorities” and “to see if [the grants] are providing tangible results to the American people.”

The review should be made even more stringent, not less. The easy riders on the gravy train deserve no free passage, and if they don’t particularly like the new discipline at the agency, they’ll just have to get over it.