

Union of Concerned Scientists Cooks the Books, Media Swallow It

An environmentalist lobbying group claims corporations pay vast sums to misrepresent climate science.

Ronald Bailey | June 5, 2012

Last week the environmental lobbying group the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a new report entitled "[A Climate of Corporate Control: How Corporations Have Influenced the U.S. Dialogue on Climate Science and Policy](#)" [PDF]. Among other things, the report claims to trace corporate donations in 2008 and 2009 to think tanks and politicians as a way to uncover the true corporate attitudes and intentions toward climate change science and policy. According to the UCS, its analysis reveals that some corporations are climate-change science hypocrites, claiming to support the climate-change “consensus” in some venues but not in others. This climate hypocrisy allegedly produces confusion among both the public and policymakers, resulting in the defeat or delay of urgent policies needed to address climate change.

Several prominent news outlets swallowed these assertions from the UCS study. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Some major U.S. corporations that support climate science in their public relations materials actively work to derail regulations and laws addressing global warming through lobbying, campaign donations and support of various advocacy groups.” In line with the findings of the UCS, the *L.A. Times* specifically declared, “General Electric has backed six environmental and non-partisan research groups that accept the scientific consensus on climate change, including the Brookings Institution and the Nature Conservancy. At the same time, it has funded four organizations that reject or question the consensus, including the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation.” Based on the UCS report, *The Guardian* (U.K.) stated, “Some of America’s top companies are spending heavily to block

action on climate change or discredit climate science, despite public commitments to sustainable and green values.” The *Guardian* specifically mentioned that UCS had identified General Electric as being two-faced about climate change. According to the UCS report, among the four GE-supported organizations that “misrepresent” climate-change science is the Reason Foundation, the nonprofit that publishes this website.

So what vast sums of money did the duplicitous executives at General Electric lavish on the Reason Foundation in 2008 and 2009 to support an implied campaign to traduce climate science? Exactly \$325. How much did GE spend on matching and direct grants on the six think tanks identified by the UCS as being pro-climate consensus? That would be \$497,744. At least with regard to General Electric’s contributions, it appears that the Union of Concerned Scientists has salted a follow-the-money trail with pieces of fool’s gold, which certain unwary news outlets obligingly picked up and reported as real bullion.

Let’s take a deeper look at just how much “support” General Electric has funneled into the Reason Foundation’s coffers. The UCS report notes it identified this “support” by mining General Electric’s two most recent IRS 990 forms, which report charitable giving by the GE Foundation. I asked Reason’s development people how much GE has contributed to the Reason Foundation during those two years. The grand total in our files and confirmed by the 990 forms investigated by the UCS researchers: \$100 in 2009, and \$225 in 2008.

Puzzled, I called up Dr. Francesca Grifo, a senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists and director of its Scientific Integrity Program. She put me on speakerphone with her and the author of the report, Gretchen Goldman. I asked them if these minuscule donations were why GE was listed as a corporate supporter of the Reason Foundation. They answered yes. *Seriously?* Yes. They added that GE’s 990 forms did not disclose what the funds would be used for, darkly implying that the money might be directed to what the UCS might regard as climate disinformation campaigns.

In a [memo](#) (pdf) sent to me the next day (at my request), Grifo explained that the UCS did not have a threshold dollar amount for funds in their analysis. She added that GE’s 990 forms do not provide further information on the nature of these payments. But that is simply not true. The 990 forms clearly indicate to even the casual investigator that the payments are matching funds for employees’ donations, meaning that individual GE employees gave money, and the company matched it. (GE matching fund donations to

the Union of Concerned Scientists for those same two years totaled \$6,980, or 21 times more than was donated to the Reason Foundation.) Grifo's memo does note that the UCS report admits “that because the details of these affiliations are not publicly available, we cannot directly link specific donations to climate-related activities.” Indeed not. But it appears that UCS nonetheless wanted credulous reporters to uncritically accept these vaguely-referenced payments as evidence of underhanded corporate influence. Digging further into GE’s 990 forms one finds that with just a few significant exceptions, all of the money donated to the various groups is in fact corporate matching funds for employee donations. In other words, GE executives had no hand in directing these donations.

Now consider the actual amounts contributed by GE employees (through GE’s matching funds program), as well the several directed donations from the GE Foundation. With regard to matching funds, the think tanks identified by UCS as climate science “supporters” are the Brookings Institution, Earthwatch, the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the Woods Hole Research Center, the Worldwatch Institute, and the World Resources Institute. The UCS’ climate “misrepresenters” are the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), and the Reason Foundation. The UCS report puts together an “anti-climate: pro-climate ratio” which is based on funding allocated between the organizations identified as anti- and pro- by UCS researchers. Much of the report focuses on political giving, but let’s restrict this analysis to just the money that individual GE employees donated to think tanks and see what that might tell us about how careful and rigorous the UCS researchers were in putting their report together.

In 2009, the think tanks identified as pro-climate received matching funds from GE amounting to \$5,216.40 for Brookings; \$150 for Earthwatch; \$44,000 for the Nature Conservancy; \$30 for Conservation International; \$185 for the Woods Hole Center; \$150 for Worldwatch; plus a directed grant of \$95,000 to the World Resources Institute; all for a grand total of \$144,731.40. The think tanks categorized as anti-climate garnered \$32,765 for Heritage; \$750 for Cato; \$50 for CEI; and \$100 for Reason; for a grand total of \$33,665.

In 2008, Brookings once again received \$5,216.40, plus a directed grant from the GE Foundation of \$100,000; Conservation International, \$250; Earthwatch, \$1,035; the Nature Conservancy, \$173,677.03; the Woods Hole Research Center, \$120; and

Worldwatch, \$250; plus a directed grant to the World Resources Institute of \$73,500; yielding a grand total \$353,013.43. GE matching funds for the opposing nonprofit think tanks came to \$5,830 for Heritage; \$2,450 for Cato; \$25 for CEI; and \$225 for Reason; amounting to a grand total of \$8,530.

When you add up the allegedly pro-climate matching funds, the total is \$497,744, while the total for the purportedly anti-climate funds from GE employees amounts to \$42,195. Applying the UCS's "methodology" to the think tank world, this yields a pro/anti-climate ratio of nearly 12 to 1. As for Reason Foundation, when you compare the total GE funding that went to pro-climate groups, that figure is more than 1,500 times greater than the paltry, but nevertheless much appreciated, matching funds Reason received. I do note that GE employees were uncommonly generous to Heritage in 2009, but I suspect that such giving might have more to do with growing Republican opposition to the Obama administration's economic policies than anything to do with concerns about climate-change science. (I also asked Reason's development team about any past GE contributions to the Reason Foundation and I am unhappy to report that the corporation last contributed in 1993 in the amount of \$10,000. This is just one year after the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change had been negotiated at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.)

But there's more. Just combing through the GE 990 forms, it appears that lots of non-profits that work on climate change issues that were "supported" by the company were unaccountably overlooked by the UCS researchers. Among those missed are Greenpeace, Earthjustice, Environmental Defense, Friends of the Earth, the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club. All of these non-profits were mentioned in connection with climate change hundreds of times in the Nexis database, whereas the Reason Foundation turned up only 37 times.

Adding up the funds from the 990 forms contributed in 2008 and 2009 by means of matching grants to these additional groups, the total comes to \$131,086. Adjusting the pro/anti ratio to take these funds into account now finds the UCS approved funding is nearly 15 times that attributed by the UCS researchers to disapproved groups. It bears noting that the direct grants (as distinct from employee matching grants) amounting to \$100,000 for the Brookings Institution and \$168,500 for the World Resources Institute are chosen by executives at the head of the GE Foundation.

I also asked Grifo on what basis did the Union of Concerned Scientists determine that the Reason Foundation “misrepresented” climate change science. Grifo and Goldman could not recall during our phone conversation, but said they would get back to me the next day with their analysis in a memo. This memo cites one specific example of alleged misrepresentation, a blog post by one of Reason Foundation’s policy analysts that linked to a *Daily Mail* article that interpreted recent temperature data released by researchers at the U.K’s Met Office Hadley Centre as showing “no warming in the past 15 years.” As Grifo points out in her memo, the Met Office hotly disputed the *Daily Mail*’s interpretation of its temperature data.

I will just note that other research groups who have been monitoring the Earth’s temperature trends for decades have a different view. For example, University of Alabama in Huntsville climatologists who have been measuring the Earth’s atmospheric temperature for more than 30 years reported last year: “While Earth’s climate has warmed in the last 33 years, the climb has been irregular. There was little or no warming for the first 19 years of satellite data. Clear net warming did not occur until the El Niño Pacific Ocean 'warming event of the century' in late 1997. Since that upward jump, there has been little or no additional warming.”

Grifo’s memo says that the UCS researchers had evaluated the Reason Foundation’s climate change website and concluded that “the foundation’s treatment of climate science was found to be misrepresentative of the scientific consensus.” I do note that the vast majority of the articles at the Foundation’s climate change site deal with climate change policy, not with science. In any case, I invite readers to go to Foundation’s climate change policy site and decide for themselves whether or not the scientific consensus on climate change is misrepresented. I cannot forbear observing that the Union of Concerned Scientists asserts in this study that a hallmark of misrepresenting science is "emphasizing unknowns" while simultaneously "ignoring what is known." Yet this seems to be precisely the strategy that the UCS pursues in its campaign against biotech crops. Perhaps Dr. Grifo, as the Union’s scientific integrity officer, could usefully spend some time getting the UCS to accept that scientific consensus.

The upshot is that a close analysis of this aspect of the Union of Concerned Scientists’ *A Climate of Corporate Control* report reveals severe shortcomings that do not inspire much confidence in the overall accuracy of the lobbying group's claims. "Follow the

money" may be one of the hoariest maxims in journalism, but it's only good advice when the money you're following actually amounts to something.

Ronald Bailey is Reason's science correspondent. His book Liberation Biology: The Scientific and Moral Case for the Biotech Revolution is now available from Prometheus Books.