

Giant ethanol maker among Gingrich's top campaign donors

By Fredreka Schouten, USA TODAY December 7, 2011

WASHINGTON – Former House speaker [Newt Gingrich](#) counts the world's largest ethanol producer as a top donor to his presidential campaign, underscoring the Republican's deep ties to an industry whose government subsidies he has steadfastly defended even while running as a fiscal conservative.

The political action committee and employees of ethanol maker POET, along with their relatives, donated \$20,000 to Gingrich's campaign to emerge as the No. 2 contributor to his election account, according to the non-partisan Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks money in politics. Only contributions from people associated with RockTenn, a packaging company in Gingrich's home state of Georgia, ranked higher in the center's tally of contributions.

POET donors include company CEO Jeff Broin, who chairs Growth Energy, an ethanol industry lobbying group that hired Gingrich as a consultant in 2009.

"Homegrown, renewable ethanol is a vital American industry, creating jobs and keeping fuel costs in check, and POET has always supported candidates who share that belief," Broin said in a written statement.

Gingrich's support for ethanol subsidies puts him starkly at odds with some of his party's prominent conservatives, who have pushed to end the \$6 billion-a-year subsidy. It also offers another example of the ways Gingrich has amassed millions as a consultant since leaving Congress in 1999.

In 2009, for instance, he penned an editorial for POET's quarterly magazine proclaiming ethanol "pro-American" because of its potential to reduce the nation's reliance on foreign oil while acting as a consultant to the ethanol trade group. The group paid Gingrich \$575,000 between 2009 and early 2011, Growth Energy spokeswoman Stephanie Dreyer said.

"For fiscal conservatives, this is almost a classic case of wasteful government spending, entirely designed not to serve any useful purpose but to buy votes," said Michael Tanner, a

senior fellow at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#). "Gingrich is not a fiscal hawk, and this is symptomatic of it."

Campaign spokesman R.C. Hammond said Gingrich has never wavered in his support for "any type of American energy."

"It is better to have it come from inside our borders so the dollars that are generated by whatever it requires to make that energy, whatever it requires to ship it and develop it, stays in America and doesn't go to [Saudi Arabia](#), Iran and Venezuela," Hammond said.

Gingrich has faced intense scrutiny in recent weeks over his business activities, including his consulting advice to mortgage giant [Freddie Mac](#). Last month, [Bloomberg News](#) reported that Gingrich's consulting firm earned at least \$1.6 million from Freddie Mac.

Gingrich has repeatedly emphasized that he has never worked as a lobbyist. His consulting work for Growth Energy came as the trade group lobbied to increase ethanol use and boost federal aid for pumps that allow drivers to blend ethanol with gasoline at gas stations. The organization, created in November 2008, spent nearly \$2.5 million on lobbying in 2009 and 2010, Senate records show.

Dreyer said Gingrich was tapped for his Washington expertise and support of ethanol.

"We were a newly formed organization at that point, still trying to figure out who we should be talking to and who we should be seeking counsel from," Dreyer said. "He helped us answer those questions."

Gingrich has long backed government support for ethanol, voting as far back in 1984 in favor of the subsidy. He also has staked his presidential campaign on a strong showing in next month's Iowa caucuses, where the subsidies and other federal ethanol aid are supported by the state's corn producers.

The [GOP](#) presidential field is divided on the issue. Former Massachusetts governor [Mitt Romney](#) supports the subsidies, while several other contenders, including Rep. [Ron Paul](#), R-Texas, and Texas Gov. [Rick Perry](#), oppose them.

The subsidy, scheduled to expire at year's end, has been targeted by Democrats and Republicans, including Sens. [Dianne Feinstein](#), a California liberal, and Oklahoma's Tom Coburn, a GOP budget hawk who has called it corporate welfare. Opponents also want to end other pro-biofuel programs, including a tariff on foreign ethanol.