



Dark Money and Barriers to Climate Action

October 29, 2019

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse
Opening statement (as prepared)

I can't underscore how pleased I am that we are having this hearing today to learn more about how corporate and dark money have been used for decades to sow doubt about climate science and obstruct climate action.

More than three decades ago, committees of the U.S. Senate held hearings on climate change. Those hearings were bipartisan, with members of both parties expressing alarm at testimony from leading scientists about how the large-scale combustion of fossil fuels was changing our climate.

Unfortunately, the fossil fuel industry did not greet this news in the manner that a responsible industry would. Rather than accept the science – much of which, as you will hear, came from the oil industry's own scientists– the fossil fuel industry decided to embark on an all-out campaign to block any government action to limit carbon pollution.

Much of this work was done through front groups and trade associations. Groups with benign-sounding names like Americans for Prosperity or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce were created or coopted to spread disinformation and oppose climate action. I call this network, with its intricate links between dozens of groups, the web of denial. Collectively, the fossil fuel industry has spent billions on phony science, propaganda, lobbying, and elections.

And why wouldn't they? The International Monetary Fund estimates that fossil fuels received a \$650 billion subsidy in the United States in 2015 alone. What's a few billion over several decades when you're on the receiving end of that kind of a windfall?

Here's the rub: This is just what we know. We know it thanks to the enterprising work of researchers and journalists, some of whom are here today as witnesses. But what they've managed to uncover is just the tip of the iceberg.

Far more important is what we don't know. These front groups and trade associations aren't legally obligated to disclose their donors. The fossil fuel companies aren't legally obligated to disclose their donations. Many donors are apparently so paranoid about their identities being revealed that they launder their donations through groups such as Donors Trust to provide further anonymity.

A simple concrete example: who funded the Heartland Institute's phony climate science textbook that it sent to hundreds of thousands of school teachers? We don't know.

What instructions did fossil fuel companies give to front groups about opposing laws and regulations that would directly affect their bottom line? We don't know.

What conversations did the fossil fuel industry and its front groups and trade associations have about purposefully spreading disinformation about climate change and climate science to the public and policy makers? We don't know.

But we could find out. None of this information is privileged. It is amenable to congressional subpoena. Congress has a legitimate interest in investigating whether fossil fuel companies are using 501(c)(3) non-profits to directly advance their financial interests. Congress has a legitimate interest in understanding whether the fossil fuel industry has lied to the public and policy makers about climate change.

Congress rightfully investigated another industry that spent decades lying to the public and policy makers. Rep. Henry Waxman's investigation of the tobacco industry was a remarkable example of Congress using its oversight powers for the public good. I would argue that the time is ripe for Congress to begin just that sort of investigation into the fossil fuel industry. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses.