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SCIENCE

Deeper Ties to Corporate Cash for Doubtful Climate Researcher

By **JUSTIN GILLIS and JOHN SCHWARTZ** FEB. 21, 2015

For years, politicians wanting to block legislation on climate change have bolstered their arguments by pointing to the work of a handful of scientists who claim that greenhouse gases pose little risk to humanity.

One of the names they invoke most often is Wei-Hock Soon, known as Willie, a scientist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics who claims that variations in the sun's energy can largely explain recent global warming. He has often appeared on conservative news programs, testified before Congress and in state capitals, and starred at conferences of people who deny the risks of global warming.

But newly released documents show the extent to which Dr. Soon's work has been tied to funding he received from corporate interests.

He has accepted more than \$1.2 million in money from the fossil-fuel industry over the last decade while failing to disclose that conflict of interest in most of his scientific papers. At least 11 papers he has published since 2008 omitted such a disclosure, and in at least eight of those cases, he appears to have violated ethical guidelines of the journals that published his work.

The documents show that Dr. Soon, in correspondence with his corporate funders, described many of his scientific papers as "deliverables" that he completed in exchange for their money. He used the same term to describe testimony he prepared for Congress.

Though Dr. Soon did not respond to questions about the documents, he has long stated that his corporate funding has not influenced his scientific findings.

The documents were obtained by Greenpeace, the environmental group, under the Freedom of Information Act. Greenpeace and an allied group, the Climate Investigations Center, shared them with several news organizations last week.

The documents shed light on the role of scientists like Dr. Soon in fostering public debate over whether human activity is causing global warming. The vast majority of experts have concluded that it is and that greenhouse emissions pose long-term risks to civilization.

Historians and sociologists of science say that since the tobacco wars of the 1960s, corporations trying to block legislation that hurts their interests have employed a strategy of creating the appearance of scientific doubt, usually with the help of ostensibly independent researchers who accept industry funding.

Fossil-fuel interests have followed this approach for years, but the mechanics of their activities remained largely hidden.

“The whole doubt-mongering strategy relies on creating the impression of scientific debate,” said Naomi Oreskes, a historian of science at Harvard University and the co-author of “Merchants of Doubt,” a book about such campaigns. “Willie Soon is playing a role in a certain kind of political theater.”

Environmentalists have long questioned Dr. Soon’s work, and his acceptance of funding from the fossil-fuel industry was previously known. But the full extent of the links was not; the documents show that corporate contributions were tied to specific papers and were not disclosed, as required by modern standards of publishing.

“What it shows is the continuation of a long-term campaign by specific fossil-fuel companies and interests to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change,” said Kert Davies, executive director of the Climate Investigations Center, a group funded by foundations seeking to limit the risks of climate change.

Charles R. Alcock, director of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center, acknowledged on Friday that Dr. Soon had violated the disclosure standards of some journals.

“I think that’s inappropriate behavior,” Dr. Alcock said. “This frankly becomes a personnel matter, which we have to handle with Dr. Soon internally.”

Dr. Soon is employed by the Smithsonian Institution, which jointly sponsors the astrophysics center with Harvard.

“I am aware of the situation with Willie Soon, and I’m very concerned about it,” W. John Kress, interim under secretary for science at the Smithsonian in Washington, said on Friday. “We are checking into this ourselves.”

Dr. Soon rarely grants interviews to reporters, and he did not respond to multiple emails and phone calls last week; nor did he respond to an interview request conveyed to him by his employer. In past public appearances, he has reacted angrily to questions about his funding sources, but then acknowledged some corporate ties and said that they had not altered his scientific findings.

“I write proposals; I let them decide whether to fund me or not,” he said at an event in Madison, Wis., in 2013. “If they choose to fund me, I’m happy to receive it.” A moment later, he added, “I would never be motivated by money for anything.”

The newly disclosed documents, plus additional documents compiled by Greenpeace over the last four years, show that at least \$409,000 of Dr. Soon’s funding in the past decade came from Southern Company Services, a subsidiary of the Southern Company, based in Atlanta.

Southern is one of the largest utility holding companies in the country, with huge investments in coal-burning power plants. The company has spent heavily over many years to lobby against greenhouse-gas regulations in Washington. More recently, it has spent significant money to research ways to limit emissions.

“Southern Company funds a broad range of research on a number of topics that have potentially significant public-policy implications for our business,” said Jeannice M. Hall, a spokeswoman. The company declined to answer detailed questions about its funding of Dr. Soon’s research.

Dr. Soon also received at least \$230,000 from the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation. (Mr. Koch’s fortune derives partly from oil refining.) However, other companies and industry groups that once supported Dr. Soon, including Exxon Mobil and the American Petroleum Institute, appear to have eliminated their grants to him in recent years.

As the oil-industry contributions fell, Dr. Soon started receiving hundreds of

thousands of dollars through DonorsTrust, an organization based in Alexandria, Va., that accepts money from donors who wish to remain anonymous, then funnels it to various conservative causes.

The Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, in Cambridge, Mass., is a joint venture between Harvard and the Smithsonian Institution, housing some 300 scientists from both institutions. Because the Smithsonian is a government agency, Greenpeace was able to request that Dr. Soon's correspondence and grant agreements be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Though often described on conservative news programs as a "Harvard astrophysicist," Dr. Soon is not an astrophysicist and has never been employed by Harvard. He is a part-time employee of the Smithsonian Institution with a doctoral degree in aerospace engineering. He has received little federal research money over the past decade and is thus responsible for bringing in his own funds, including his salary.

Though he has little formal training in climatology, Dr. Soon has for years published papers trying to show that variations in the sun's energy can explain most recent global warming. His thesis is that human activity has played a relatively small role in causing climate change.

Many experts in the field say that Dr. Soon uses out-of-date data, publishes spurious correlations between solar output and climate indicators, and does not take account of the evidence implicating emissions from human behavior in climate change.

Gavin A. Schmidt, head of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies in Manhattan, a NASA division that studies climate change, said that the sun had probably accounted for no more than 10 percent of recent global warming and that greenhouse gases produced by human activity explained most of it.

"The science that Willie Soon does is almost pointless," Dr. Schmidt said.

The Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, whose scientists focus largely on understanding distant stars and galaxies, routinely distances itself from Dr. Soon's findings. The Smithsonian has also published a statement accepting the scientific consensus on climate change.

Dr. Alcock said that, aside from the disclosure issue, he thought it was

important to protect Dr. Soon's academic freedom, even if most of his colleagues disagreed with his findings.

Dr. Soon has found a warm welcome among politicians in Washington and state capitals who try to block climate action. United States Senator James M. Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who claims that climate change is a global scientific hoax, has repeatedly cited Dr. Soon's work over the years.

In a Senate debate last month, Mr. Inhofe pointed to a poster with photos of scientists questioning the climate-change consensus, including Dr. Soon. "These are scientists that cannot be challenged," the senator said. A spokeswoman for the senator said Friday that he was traveling and could not be reached for comment.

As of late last week, most of the journals in which Dr. Soon's work had appeared were not aware of the newly disclosed documents. The Climate Investigations Center is planning to notify them over the coming week. Several journals advised of the situation by The New York Times said they would look into the matter.

Robert J. Strangeway, the editor of a journal that published three of Dr. Soon's papers, said that editors relied on authors to be candid about any conflicts of interest. "We assume that when people put stuff in a paper, or anywhere else, they're basically being honest," said Dr. Strangeway, editor of the Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics.

Dr. Oreskes, the Harvard science historian, said that academic institutions and scientific journals had been too lax in recent decades in ferreting out dubious research created to serve a corporate agenda.

"I think universities desperately need to look more closely at this issue," Dr. Oreskes said. She added that Dr. Soon's papers omitting disclosure of his corporate funding should be retracted by the journals that published them.

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