

Doublethink

The Fossil Fuel Lobbyists Who
Represent Climate Foundations

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“Natural gas is the one energy resource, the driver and key component in solving the global energy and climate equation.”

—written [testimony](#) of Chris Zeigler, lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute, Ohio Chapter, May 25, 2021

Introduction

Fossil fuel lobbyists and climate foundations would seem to exist on opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to the climate crisis and the need to rapidly transition from fossil fuels to renewables. But research by F Minus finds that some of America’s largest climate foundations pursue policy goals in non-climate areas such as education by hiring lobbyists who also work for fossil fuel companies. For 2022–23, F Minus [identified](#) 86 foundations employing fossil fuel lobbyists, 19 of whom have Environment as a major grantmaking priority.

Why does it matter if a climate foundation employs a fossil fuel lobbyist? The fossil fuel industry is rapidly losing the social license needed to build new projects

as the severity of the climate crisis becomes increasingly clear. And yet, the industry remains firmly embedded in U.S. state legislatures because of positive or merely neutral public opinion about its lobbyists, more than 1,500 of whom also represent non-fossil-fuel companies, schools, nonprofits, and other organizations whose activities are perceived as beneficial.

This report focuses on five foundations whose grantmaking is most conflicted with the pro-fossil-fuel agenda of their own lobbyists: Ballmer Giving, New Venture Fund, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Pittsburgh Foundation, and the health-focused Nemours Foundation.

Ballmer Giving

Environmental grants for 2019–2023: \$228.6 million

“The need to act and the opportunity for philanthropy to play a significant, global role is clear. The science is evident and astounding,” said Sam Ballmer in a [press release](#) announcing the launch of the climate wing of his father Steve Ballmer’s foundation in Oct. 2022. “We know every tenth of a degree of warming matters to the health of the planet and the lives of billions of people—and that every action we take today will make

exponentially more positive impact than if we continue to delay action.”

Despite this climate commitment, Ballmer Giving shares the lobbying firm of [Insight Strategic Partners](#) with Chevron and Puget Sound Energy, which is building an LNG export terminal on the Tacoma Tidelands called [Puget Sound LNG](#), a project opposed by the [Sierra Club](#), [350](#), and the Puyallup Tribe, on

whose land it is being built. From 2020–2022, Ballmer Giving paid this lobbying firm \$192,000, while Puget Sound Energy paid them \$413,000.

Ballmer Giving has pledged \$12 million to [The Tenure Facility](#) from 2022–2026, which provides grants to help Indigenous Peoples secure the rights to their lands and forests. This lobbying relationship is shared with Puget Sound Energy despite the Puyallup Tribe's concerns that the terminal will destroy lands and waters sacred to its people.

In 2022, Insight Strategic Partners also lobbied on behalf of NextEra Energy Resources, which is building the Mountain Valley Gas Pipeline. This pipeline was approved in a [controversial deal](#) brokered during

the 2023 debt ceiling debate talks between the Biden White House and U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV). NextEra also owns fracked gas drilling and pipeline assets throughout Texas, the Southeast, and Mid-Atlantic regions.

Ballmer Giving has also [pledged](#) \$6 million for 2022–2027 to the Woodwell Climate Research Center to measure ice and permafrost loss at the North and South Poles. Yet in 2023, Insight Strategic Partners also lobbied on behalf of Chevron, a long-time advocate for Arctic drilling and a company whose emissions from 2018 to 2030 will account for an [estimated](#) 1.3% of the global 1.5C carbon budget.

New Venture Fund

Environmental grants for 2017–2021: \$183.4 million

New Venture Fund employed fossil fuel lobbyists in six states in 2022–23, the highest number among the 19 climate-focused foundations in the F Minus database. These states were California, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, Virginia, and Washington, and the foundation's environmental grantmaking for 2017–2021 included grants to organizations in all of them. New Venture Fund's environmental giving is focused on “ocean and river conservation, alternative energy sources and

reduction of fossil fuels, protection of ocean life, wild-lands conservation, ecological agriculture, and habitat restoration,” and its Climate Justice program is focused on Alaska, East Africa, and the Bay of Bengal.

As described in these state summaries, New Venture Fund's own contract lobbyists are in many cases causing the environmental problems that its grantees are trying to solve.

Washington

Lobbying firm: Insight Strategic Partners

Clients: New Venture Fund, Chevron, Puget Sound Energy, and NextEra Energy Resources

Like Ballmer Giving, New Venture Fund employs the firm of Insight Strategic Partners, whose client Chevron is widely engaged in [greenwashing](#), and whose client Puget Sound Energy is building Puget LNG on Puyallup land over the tribe's objections. And also like Ballmer Giving, NVF has supported climate initiatives in indigenous communities, helping to [launch](#) BlueCommons, a nonprofit organization with a focus on “Tribal infrastructure and climate resilience.”

From 2017–2021, NVF gave \$365,000 to environmental groups in Washington state, including a \$165,000 grant to Coltura, which is working to change public attitudes about the acceptability of using gasoline. For Chevron, retaining the same lobbying firm as a foundation funding anti-gasoline advocacy is a triumph of greenwashing.

New Venture Fund *(continued)*

California

Lobbying firm: Arc Strategies

Clients: New Venture Fund and the Berry Corporation

From 2017–2021, New Venture Fund gave \$5.5 million to environmental groups in California, supporting organizations such as Earth Island Institute, which has worked to raise awareness about the environmental and health [risks](#) faced by communities who live near oil and gas wells in California.

Yet in 2023, NVF employed the same lobbying firm, Arc Strategies, as oil driller the Berry Corporation. Arc Strategies reported [lobbying](#) for Berry on a bill requiring the plugging of orphan oil wells (AB 1167), and on a bill that would have required the California state pension fund to divest from fossil fuels (SB 252). Among the organizations opposing SB 252 was the California Independent Petroleum Association, whose board includes Jason Marshall, Berry’s Vice President of Corporate affairs and California’s former acting State Oil and Gas Supervisor.

The Berry Corporation is a member of the Western States Petroleum Association, which also lobbied against the orphan well bill, against a bill requiring companies with revenues of more than \$1 billion to disclose their Scope 3 emissions (SB 253), and against a bill requiring companies with more than \$500 million in revenue to disclose their climate-related financial risk (SB 261).

What was Arc Strategies doing for New Venture Fund while lobbying for Berry? In a brazen act of Orwellian doublethink, the firm was [promoting](#) a bill, SB 499, that would require schools to come up with plans to protect student health during extreme heat days, which are increasing in number and severity due to the climate crisis.

Since 2021, New Venture Fund has paid Arc Strategies \$79,000 for lobbying, during which time the firm has been paid \$324,000 by the Berry Corporation.

Maryland

Lobbying firm: Old Line Government Affairs

Clients: New Venture Fund and NRG Energy

From 2017–2021, New Venture Fund gave \$1.55 million for environmental work in Maryland, including a \$150,000 grant to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, whose mission is to serve as a watchdog for the Bay and its rivers and streams.

In 2022, NVF employed the lobbying firm of Old Line Government Affairs, which also represented NRG Energy, whose Maryland-based power plants have been responsible for nitrogen runoff that is suffocating the Bay. In 2016, NRG [agreed](#) to pay \$1 million to settle a federal lawsuit alleging illegal releases of nitrogen from its two Maryland coal plants.

To what extent did NRG’s legislative agenda in 2022 conflict with NVF’s climate agenda? Maryland’s disclosure requirements for what, exactly, lobbyists are lobbying on are extremely weak, so that Old Line reported the single word “Energy” for its work on behalf of NRG, and reported “non profit charity leadership” on behalf of NVF. For 2022, Old Line Government Affairs disclosed payments of \$52,300 from NVF and \$32,200 from NRG Energy.

Pew Charitable Trusts

Environmental Grants for 2018-2022: \$20.1 million

Pew's ocean conservation program has a focus on plastic pollution, and in Oct. 2020 Pew released "[Breaking the Plastic Wave](#)," with recommendations for reducing plastic pollution resulting from fossil fuel production and plastics sourced from fossil fuels.

Starkly at odds with Pew's work on plastics and ocean conservation is its 2022-23 employment of the Colorado lobbying firm of Politicalworks. This firm also represents Chevron, whose subsidiary the Chevron Phillips Chemical Company is [estimated](#) to be the 15th largest global producer of SUP-bound polymers, with 1.8 million metric tons produced in 2019.

Sharing the firm of Politicalworks with Chevron would also seem to be incompatible with Pew's focus on marine life conservation. Chevron has a record of [oil spills](#) in the Gulf of Mexico. Chevron's El Segundo, California oil refinery was recently [found](#) to be the biggest emitter of two water pollutants, selenium and nitrogen, among 80 U.S. oil refineries. In Aug. 2023, Chevron and the state of Louisiana [sued](#) the Biden Administration for limiting oil and gas leasing in the Gulf of Mexico as part of an effort to protect the endangered Rice's whale.

Politicalworks might be Exhibit A when it comes to American lobbying firms playing both sides of the climate crisis. In 2022, the firm lobbied for Pew in support of a bill to create safe road crossings for wildlife—an issue driven by existing wildlife habitats being threatened by climate change. But lobbying for the Colorado Competitive Council, a fossil fuel front group, the firm opposed legislation (HB19-1261) to reduce Colorado's greenhouse gas emissions.

Politicalworks has also lobbied both for and against the same climate bill on behalf of different clients.

In 2022, the firm lobbied for the Nature Conservancy in support of HB22-1244, a bill to regulate toxic

contaminants, while lobbying against the bill on behalf of Onward Energy.

In 2011, Pew's ocean conservation program published [recommendations](#) on rehabilitating marine life in the Gulf of Mexico after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. Yet in 2018, Pew employed Colorado lobbyist Meghan Wagner at the same time she was lobbying for Anadarko Petroleum, which owned 25% of Deepwater Horizon and was fined \$159 million for damages resulting from the disaster.

In 2023, Pew shared Utah lobbyist Alexander Tarbet with Mineral Carbonation International, a carbon sequestration company. Environmental groups such as [Earthjustice](#) and the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) have criticized carbon sequestration as economically unsound, environmentally unsafe, and a dangerous "false solution" that gives fossil fuel companies an excuse to keep emitting CO₂.

In South Carolina, Pew shared lobbyist L. Dewitt Zemp with Duke Energy, whose electric substations in South Carolina and North Carolina were recently [found](#) to have emitted 11 metric tons of the world's most potent greenhouse gas, sulfur hexafluoride (SF₆), making it the top emitter of SF₆ among U.S. utilities. One pound of SF₆ heats the planet as much as 25,200 pounds of carbon dioxide and remains in the atmosphere for 3,200 years, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Duke Energy has also been responsible for widespread coal tar and coal ash [pollution](#) in South Carolina. In 2015, the company plead guilty and was [sentenced](#) to pay \$102 million for Clean Water Act violations in North Carolina.

Pittsburgh Foundation

Environmental grants for 2017–2021: \$24.9 million

The Pittsburgh Foundation's climate giving is focused on economic justice and the disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis on historically underprivileged communities. Yet as [reported](#) by *The Guardian* in Oct. 2023, the foundation's own lobbying firm of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney is blocking solutions to problems that the foundation's environmental grantees are trying to solve. From 2020–23, the foundation paid the firm \$278,000 for lobbying.

The health risks of living near shale gas drilling are one of the most urgent environmental justice issues in Pennsylvania, but the foundation's lobbying firm and its client EQT are members of the Marcellus Shale Coalition (MSC), which [opposes](#) HB 170, a bill that would increase minimum setback distances between shale gas wells and residences. The MSC also [opposes](#) HB 652, which would give the state Department of Environmental Protection more power to regulate industrial development in environmental justice areas.

In addition to EQT, this lobbying firm's 15 other fossil fuel clients include the Koch Companies, leading funders of climate denialism. In Pennsylvania, the Koch Companies are among the fossil fuel interests trying to block the state from joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. According to data from the state Department of Environmental Protection, the delay in joining the RGGI is so far [responsible](#) for 128 premature deaths from air pollution that could have been prevented through the program, 94 hospitalizations from respiratory and cardiovascular emergencies that could have been prevented, and 9,060 asthma attacks

The Koch Companies are also leading funders of efforts to defund public education. Both of these Koch goals are at odds with the Pittsburgh Foundation's funding of youth climate activism and education, with education being the foundation's largest grantmaking area from 2017–2021, at \$71.6 million.

Nemours Foundation

Health Care grants for 2017–2021: \$2.5 million

The Nemours Foundation funds research programs focused on childhood cancer, and in 2023 the Foundation received a \$78 million [gift](#) from the Lena Dean Moseley Foundation to support a new in-patient treatment facility for child cancer victims and their families. The Foundation's grantmaking on Environment consists of a single \$10,000 grant between 2017–2021; however Nemours is included in this study because the climate crisis is also a health care crisis, as frontline communities are exposed to carcinogens from fossil fuel projects, and people everywhere are exposed to higher levels of ground-level ozone and higher temperatures, both of which can exacerbate pre-existing health conditions. In Nov. 2023, a [report](#) by the Lancet Countdown found that climate change continues to have a worsening effect on health and mortality around the world, including greater food insecurity linked to heat waves and droughts.

Like the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Nemours Foundation employed the Pennsylvania lobbying firm of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney in 2023, a firm whose 16 fossil fuel clients include EQT, the largest fracking company in southwestern Pennsylvania and a member of the Marcellus Shale Coalition. In Feb. 2023, Nemours became a client of the lobbying firm One+Strategies, whose fossil fuel clients also include EQT. In Aug. 2023, the University of Pittsburgh published a [study](#) finding that children living near fracked gas wells were seven times more likely to develop the most common form of childhood cancer. The firm is also a leading voice for coal in Pennsylvania, where the mining and burning of coal and the disposal of coal waste have been linked to cancer in [miners](#), cancer in [neighborhoods](#) near coal power projects, and cancer among [prisoners](#) at a southwest Pennsylvania prison located next to a coal ash dump.

From 2017–2021, Nemours gave \$50,000 to the Child Cancer Fund in Florida. At the same time, Nemours shared the Florida lobbying firm of Dean Mead with the Williams Companies, the largest developer of gas pipelines in the U.S. The routine and accidental release of methane and carcinogenic volatile organic compounds from Williams's gas processing facilities led to an Apr. 2023 [settlement](#) with the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection in which the company agreed to spend \$8.5 million to strengthen leak

detection and repair practices at 15 of its facilities, including a gas processing plant in Mobile, Alabama.

In New Jersey, Nemours shared the lobbying firm of Princeton Public Affairs with TC Energy, which is seeking to increase its extraction of oil from Canadian tar sands. Exposure to tar sands chemicals has been linked to [higher rates of cancer](#) in Indigenous communities and [dangerous air pollution](#).

Conclusion

In 2014, a group of prominent climate philanthropies confronted a disconnect between their own rhetoric and actions on climate. Foundations were continuing to invest in fossil fuel companies while, at the same time, making grants in support of climate groups who were calling on universities to divest from fossil fuels. Recognizing their responsibility to lead by example, 17 U.S. foundations pledged to divest and created [Divest-Invest Philanthropy](#), a coalition which now includes more than 200 foundations.

Foundations must also be held accountable for the lobbyists they employ—lobbyists who in some cases are causing the climate problems that these foundations' grantees are trying to solve. Condemning plastic pollution while employing the same lobbying firm as Chevron. Trying to save the Chesapeake Bay while employing the same firm as a company whose coal plants are choking it. Championing environmental justice while employing the same firm as Pennsylvania's leading opponents of environmental justice legislation. This strategy ignores the holistic nature of the climate crisis and undermines the advocacy of hundreds of smaller, less well-funded organizations who are working to delegitimize the fossil fuel industry.

Recommendations

In Aug. 2023, ten national climate organizations joined F Minus in [calling](#) on local governments, schools, businesses, and other victims of the climate crisis to cut ties with lobbyists who work for fossil fuel interests. Here are additional F Minus recommendations for foundations.

1. Foundations and especially climate foundations should adopt exclusion policies of not working with lobbyists who represent fossil fuel companies.
2. Foundations should encourage their grantees to adopt such exclusion policies.
3. Grantees have a responsibility to make sure that their own choice of lobbyist is not undermining the climate movement.
4. States need to pass stronger lobbyist disclosure laws and improve their systems for making lobbyist data public.

Sources

Lobbyist registration, compensation, and activity data in this report were obtained from state agencies. Foundation grantmaking data was obtained from Candid.

About F Minus

F Minus is a research and advocacy organization that tracks the extent to which fossil fuel lobbyists also represent victims of the climate crisis. The F Minus [database](#) of state-level fossil fuel lobbyists tags these lobbyists' other clients by sector, including Arts, Conservation, Education, Environment, Government, Health care, Insurance, Museums, Parks, Philanthropy, Skiing, Tech, Utilities, and more than 80 other sectors.

Cover photo

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