

Emails reiterate EPA chief's ties to fossil fuel interests

June 16 2017, by Michael Biesecker And Adam Kealoha Causey

Newly obtained emails underscore just how closely Environmental Protection Agency chief Scott Pruitt coordinated with fossil fuel companies while serving as Oklahoma's state attorney general, a position in which he frequently sued to block federal efforts to curb planet-warming carbon emissions.

The latest batch of Pruitt's emails, provided to The Associated Press on Thursday, runs more than 4,000 pages. They include schedules and lists of speaking engagements from the years before Pruitt became the nation's top environmental watchdog, recounting dozens of meetings between Pruitt, members of his staff, and executives and lobbyists from the coal, oil and gas industries. Many of the calendar entries were blacked out, making it impossible for the public to know precisely where Pruitt traveled or with whom he met.

A June 2016 email that was released showed a board member of the Domestic Energy Producers Alliance seeking a last-minute meeting with Pruitt's team to brief them "regarding a pending federal tax issue that is related to the state's position on the Clean Power Plan."

The trade group represents independent oil and gas producers, including the billionaire Harold Hamm, a political backer of Pruitt and frequent adviser to President Donald Trump. At the time, Oklahoma was one of more than two dozen mostly GOP-led states suing the EPA in federal court to stop the Obama administration's effort to regulate [carbon emissions](#) from coal-fired power plants.

"Greg is Govt Relations for Denbury Resources and is a gem of a dude," wrote DEPA Executive Director Pete Regan, referring to oil and gas lobbyist Greg Schnacke. "He serves on DEPA executive Comm w Harold Hamm. AG Pruitt was on multiple exec calls on 2015 giving updates re 'sue and settle', endangered species cases, etc. ... Greg worked closely with Sen. Bob Dole and has great stories."

A spokesman for Pruitt at the EPA declined to comment, referring questions to the office of current Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter. Prior to his appointment by the state's Republican governor, Hunter had worked as a top staffer for Pruitt.

Democratic senators fought unsuccessfully to get copies of Pruitt's emails from Oklahoma prior to his February confirmation vote. Shortly after Pruitt was sworn in as EPA administrator, an Oklahoma judge ruled that Pruitt had been violating the state's public records law by withholding his correspondence for at least two years. The judge ordered their release following a lawsuit filed by the Center for Media and Democracy, a left-leaning advocacy group.

More than 7,500 emails were released under court order in February, some of which raised questions about the accuracy of Pruitt's testimony during his Senate confirmation hearing. In both a written statement and under questioning from a Democratic lawmaker, Pruitt said he had always used a state email account for government business and a private account for personal matters.

Yet once the emails were released, they showed Pruitt had occasionally used his private email account to communicate with his staff and others, including lobbyists. It is not illegal in Oklahoma for public officials to use private email as long as they are retained and made available as public records.

Last month, Pruitt sent a letter to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee seeking to clarify his earlier testimony about the use of a private email account.

"My practice is to conduct official business through official channels, including my state-provided email account," Pruitt wrote. "Under Oklahoma law, political matters must be transacted using personal [email](#) accounts. That includes emails concerning political matters that may arguably also touch on state business."

Though Pruitt wrote that he had since provided all emails from his personal account to the Oklahoma attorney general's office for review, the EPA chief contends he now has no say in how or when Hunter might choose to release them.

Hunter's spokeswoman, Terri Watkins, said his office is continuing to provide documents as they are reviewed and become available.

© 2017 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Emails reiterate EPA chief's ties to fossil fuel interests (2017, June 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-emails-reiterate-epa-chief-ties.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--