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Exxon Cut Financing to Climate Skeptics, Group Says

By *LESLIE KAUFMAN*

Greenpeace U.S.A. has issued [a report](#) saying that all of the research funding received since 2003 by Willie Soon, an astrophysicist who has been a critic of climate science, came from oil or coal interests like ExxonMobil and the Southern Company, a utility that burns coal.

Dr. Soon, who works at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, has researched whether solar variance might be responsible for climate warming. He earned notoriety among climatologists when he attacked Michael Mann's so-called "hockey stick" graph of warming temperatures in 2003 and when he wrote that polar bears were not threatened by a decline in Arctic ice in 2007.

Dr. Soon did not reply to e-mail messages or return messages left with his employer seeking comment.

12:52 p.m. | Updated Charles Alcock, director of the astrophysics center, acknowledged that Dr. Soon's grants since 2003 had come from fossil-fuel energy companies or from foundations that receive money from the fossil fuel industry. He said that Dr. Soon's grants were not typical for his staff and that it was a "concern" but nonetheless acceptable, because the money came with no conditions and the grant sources were disclosed when Dr. Soon's work was published.

"As long as there are no strings with the money and as long as there is full disclosure, I am fine with it," Dr. Alcock said.

What may be more intriguing about the Greenpeace report, issued on Tuesday, is a tangential finding: according to Greenpeace's research director, Kert Davies, ExxonMobil has sharply reduced its funding for groups that dispute that global warming is under way.

Greenpeace used a Freedom of Information Act Request to obtain extensive records and e-mails from the Smithsonian regarding Dr. Soon's research funding. It discovered, for example, a \$55,000 grant from ExxonMobil in 2007-8 for research on "Arctic climate change."

For more than a decade now, climate scientists and their allies have linked Exxon money to groups that promote skepticism of the science underlying global warming. The links brought Exxon some negative press. Then in 2008, the company promised shareholders it would stop financing groups that had become a "distraction."

Many climate groups wondered if it would follow through. But recent evidence indicates that it has to a significant extent. Alan Jeffers, an ExxonMobil spokesperson, says the company and its foundation are no longer disbursing grants to Dr. Soon, for example.

Greenpeace said that Exxon's most recent annual worldwide giving report, released this week, confirmed that it was not financing Dr. Soon. Numerous other groups that are critics of climate science and longtime Exxon beneficiaries — the Frontiers of Freedom and the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, for example — have also been dropped, according to that report.

In total, Greenpeace found Exxon has reduced its donations to such groups from a peak of \$3.4 million in 2005 to less than \$800,000 for 2010. "Without giving them any credit, it does make a big difference," Mr. Davies said.

Mr. Jeffers of Exxon also acknowledged a shift in his company's funding strategy. "I am not prepared to talk about the individual grant requirements, but if their positions are distracting to how we are going to meet the energy needs of the world, then we didn't want to fund them," he said.

Mr. Davies said he would still like Exxon to acknowledge the damage that Greenpeace contends the company has done. "It is like leaving a room without ever saying they are sorry," he said.

An earlier version of this post misstated the name of the center for which the astrophysicist Willie Soon works. It is the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, not the Harvard-Smithsonian Astrophysics Observatory.