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A Climate Skeptic Builds a Following of True Believers

By EVAN LEHMANN of



Tim Phillips is working full time to remind people how much they're being hurt by the high price of gas. It hikes the cost of their groceries, bleeds away their income and contributes to unemployment by hurting small businesses.

Those are the painful impacts of climbing gas prices, he tells small crowds in rural America. Then Phillips gives the activists, who are collected on courthouse lawns or in town parks, what they've been waiting for: President Obama is doing it on purpose.

"Now why on Earth would they be wanting to boost gasoline prices with unemployment at 9.1 percent?" Phillips, who's the president of Americans for Prosperity, said to 45 people in Harrisonburg, Va., attending a "Running On Empty" campaign event last month.

It's "their global warming agenda," he adds. "They have an ideological agenda that says this: 'We don't want fossil fuels. We don't want people putting gas in their cars and using coal to heat and cool their homes. We want our favorite energy sources, wind, solar, electric [cars]. We want those sources, but they're more expensive. So in order to make them competitive, we've got to drive up the cost of traditional fossil fuels.'"

Phillips sees himself as the center of a growing climate opposition. His nonprofit helped make federal cap-and-trade legislation poisonous among conservative candidates. It is trying to energize activists against state-based climate programs, and along the way, it's sowing doubts about the science of global warming.

Americans for Prosperity and its sister foundation are the beneficiaries of Koch Industries Inc. and other oil and gas industry funding sources, though the degree to which those organizations support AFP can't be confirmed because the government doesn't require the disclosure of nonprofit donors.

Under the watch of Phillips, who joined AFP in 2006, the group has grown substantially. AFP's income increased fivefold from \$3.4 million in 2007 to \$16.3 million in 2009, according to tax records. Meanwhile, Americans for Prosperity Foundation, an educational group that provides

loans to AFP, raised \$10.8 million in 2009. That's about twice as much as it raised in 2007.

A well-heeled populist

The booming cash flow is building an expanding network of media campaigns and advocacy efforts that absorbed \$14.5 million in 2009. Among AFP's expenses were \$9.5 million for advertising and consulting, \$574,000 for travel and \$724,000 for group events. Those actions laid the groundwork for the group's voter mobilization efforts during the 2010 midterm elections.

The expansion also stimulated AFP's employment profile. The group reported paying employees \$1.2 million in 2009, up from \$792,000 two years earlier.

Phillips strikes a populist tone when talking about the burden of gasoline prices. Poor and unemployed people are hurt most, he says. But he's distant from those financial strains; he was paid \$251,819 in 2009, according to the most recent tax records on file.

Everyone around Phillips calls him Tim. His rigid positions on conservative policy belie a folksy easiness in groups. He was recently seen on his knees helping children squeeze the air from a political prop -- a giant gas pump deriding Obama's energy policies. His three sons -- two teenagers and a 21-year-old -- are the product of public schools in Loudoun County, Va., he says.

By his telling, they are deeply skeptical of school programs on climate change.

"The environmental movement has been so heavy-handed on campus ... and even at the high school level, that [to] most kids I know, the man, literally the authority figure who's trying to ram this down their throats, is the environmental movement," Phillips said in an interview after a rally in Roanoke, Va. "This is like getting preached to about holding your girlfriend's hand. It's that over the top. And they all make fun of it."

Phillips makes jokes about the science, too, reducing peer-reviewed research to a partisan position pursued, he says, by radical liberals.

"It's no longer global warming, right?" he said at one event. "What is it now? It's climate change! So if it rains, it's their way. If it snows, it's their way. If it's cold, it's their way. It's climate change now."

Volcanoes and 'unsettled' science

Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, described Americans for Prosperity as operating on a political plane where opinions of conservative celebrities

reinforce ideology over reality.

"I think they tend to put this in the category of faith and belief," she said. "For those people, at this moment at least, it's not a matter of facts and evidence. Quite honestly, we need to figure out how to move beyond certain barriers, because I think actually a lot of people who are questioning, or confused about, or denying the reality of climate change never actually look at the scientific evidence."

Phillips declined to talk about the science of climate change in an interview, apart from saying it's "unsettled" and "ideologically tinged."

Virginia state Sen. Mark Obenshain, a Republican who attended a recent rally, has his own doubts about the scientific findings, which connect climbing carbon dioxide concentrations in Earth's atmosphere with rising temperatures, heavier downpours, heat waves and global humidity.

"I think man-made contributions are dwarfed by natural causes," Obenshain said in an interview, adding that routine volcanic eruptions would negate greenhouse gas reductions achieved by a cap-and-trade program.

But that claim is in dispute.

Annual greenhouse gas output by all the planet's volcanoes is equivalent to the amount of carbon dioxide released by humans in three to five days, according to an analysis released last month by Terrence Gerlach of the U.S. Geological Survey.

The review found that volcanoes release between 130 million and 440 million metric tons of CO₂ per year -- less than the amount of carbon dioxide targeted under the cap-and-trade plan proposed by Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Edward Markey (D-Mass.) in 2009. That plan sought to cut carbon dioxide by 2.3 billion metric tons annually by 2020, and by 8.3 billion metric tons by 2050, according to the World Resources Institute.

For Phillips, the emphasis is on discrediting policies to address climate change. His group opposes many energy incentives, including those for wind, solar, ethanol, and natural gas vehicles. AFP also endorses ending all earmarks, including those for Koch Industries, which has enduring connections to Phillips' group.

Koch brothers 'set broad parameters'

AFP is one of two groups to emerge from Citizens for a Sound Economy, a conservative political advocacy group founded with the help of Charles and David Koch, who operate the

energy services giant Koch Industries, one of the nation's largest private companies. David Koch is a board member of AFP's foundation, as is Richard Fink, an executive with Koch Companies Public Sector LLC, the Koch lobbying arm.

"They set broad parameters, but they give us a lot of freedom," Phillips said of his foundation's board of directors.

It's unclear how much money Koch has given AFP and its foundation. The company disclosed on its website that Koch Industries provided less than 10 percent of the \$26 million AFP and AFPP raised in 2009.

The advocacy group retains other ties with Koch. Phillips was a speaker last year at one of Koch's major organizational retreats. He sat on a panel named "Mobilizing Citizens for November," which provided "a strategic plan to educate voters on the importance of economic freedom," according to a copy of the agenda obtained by the liberal think tank Center for American Progress.

Another discussion agenda explored a loaded question: "How discredited is the climate change argument?"

Other people attending the Virginia rallies criticized the Obama administration for not authorizing enough new oil and gas drilling, for protecting the environment over businesses, and for being "against America," as Bernard Williams said.

"This administration is looking for ways to bring this nation down," said Williams, a retired psychiatrist. "That might sound radical to you. It doesn't to me."

Asked why Obama would do that, Williams said he doesn't know the president's motivation, but referenced his medical experience to suggest that Obama might be "pissed off."

Shifting away from religious voters

Phillips' efforts to mobilize fiscal conservatives mark a shift away from social conservative politics, in which he concentrated on invigorating Christian voters. In 1997, Phillips helped launch Century Strategies with Ralph Reed, the former director of the Christian Coalition.

Phillips directed Century Strategies' effort to identify Christian primary voters in Iowa and other states for George W. Bush in 2000, says Gary Marx, who worked under Phillips and is now executive director of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Reed's newest advocacy group.

By shifting to fiscal conservative issues, Phillips might be freer to criticize climate change. Marx says religious leaders walk a fine line on environmental topics, in part because a large

segment of the constituency is attuned to "creation care" -- or earthly stewardship. That can soften the opposition that groups like Faith and Freedom might have toward government regulations.

"They're definitely more coming from the libertarian camp and speaking to the role of government," Marx said of Americans for Prosperity, which he says is playing an important role in conservative politics.

Political observers, he said, "can throw [Christians] into this more libertarian mindset where they're just out there for no government at all. That's not the case. You can do polls of evangelicals, and there is a deep love for the environment."

Still, many social conservatives are skeptical of climate change, Marx said. But generally they're more willing to accept the man-made contribution to global warming, and modest government programs to address it, he added.

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