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### **In Defense of Dr. Willie Soon from Politically Motivated Attacks**

**By James M. Taylor**

#### **Summary**

Dr. Wei-Hock Soon is a first-generation American who stands out in the predominantly white male world of climate science research. Not afraid to challenge the orthodox establishment, Dr. Soon (known to friends and colleagues as “Willie”) has published powerful scientific evidence that Earth’s climate is not very sensitive to changes in carbon dioxide concentrations.

After publication of his most recent coauthored paper in China’s leading journal of scientific research, the peer-reviewed *Science Bulletin*, published by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and National Natural Science Foundation of China, environmental and partisan activist groups such as Greenpeace and MoveOn.org have attempted to smear Dr. Soon and his coauthors. These groups claim Dr. Soon violated academic ethics by failing to disclose to the *Science Bulletin* some prior funding grants as conflicts of interest.

The campaign against Dr. Soon has included news stories with major newspapers such as *The New York Times*; an online petition to pressure his employer, the prestigious Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, to terminate Dr. Soon; and even letters from members of Congress claiming Dr. Soon’s “failure to disclose his funding sources” is evidence of more widespread failures by other scientists who question the alleged “consensus” promoted by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

A review of the facts and evidence shows these claims are without merit.

#### **Background Facts**

Dr. Soon and three scientific colleagues generated tremendous attention in January 2015 when the *Science Bulletin* published their paper showing Earth’s climate is less sensitive to atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations than asserted by IPCC. The paper or its abstract were downloaded from the *Science Bulletin*’s website some 22,000 times, more than any other paper ever published by the peer-reviewed journal.

Embarrassed by the paper's finding that the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has probably overstated climate sensitivity to carbon dioxide by a factor of three, Greenpeace, MoveOn.org, and other advocacy groups active in the global warming debate coordinated an attack on Dr. Soon using documents released by the Smithsonian Institution in response to FOIA requests filed by Greenpeace.

The now-public information shows some of the grant money donated to the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (henceforth "Smithsonian") that ultimately funded Dr. Soon's work for the Smithsonian came from companies in the energy production or distribution industries. Global warming activist groups claim such grants constitute a conflict of interest, even though they were not earmarked for the specific research and publications, and that Dr. Soon had an ethical obligation to report this support to the editors of the peer-reviewed publications that accepted his work.

## **Grant Vetting and Procedures**

Contrary to media reports, the grants from "energy interests" used to support Dr. Soon's research at the Smithsonian were received by the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, not by Dr. Soon himself. The Smithsonian staff vetted and approved these grant and then kept about 40 percent of the total as a fee for acting as a firewall between a donor and the researcher.

Prior to conducting research on behalf of the Smithsonian, Dr. Soon would draw up a grant proposal that summarized the scientific questions he planned to research. Third-party entities interested in funding the research made their interest known to the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian vetted the research proposal and grant offers to ensure the research was scientifically proper and would not present any conflicts of interest. Only after conducting the vetting process did the Smithsonian authorize the research and the funding. The third-party funders wrote their checks directly to the Smithsonian, which was the grant recipient. The Smithsonian then distributed a portion of the grant money (usually a little more than half) to Dr. Soon as payment for his services.

This process, which is not uncommon for universities and other research organizations, means the Smithsonian investigated and certified that none of the grant money received by Dr. Soon posed a conflict of interest. This determination of non-conflict is especially compelling considering the Smithsonian is administered by the United States government. Any allegations that Dr. Soon behaved unethically by not reporting Smithsonian grant money as "conflicts of interest" face an uphill battle to prove the federally administered Smithsonian ruled incorrectly and Dr. Soon knew the Smithsonian had ruled incorrectly.

Dr. Soon's critics present no context or evidence to support their allegations. They have presented no facts or evidence to show the Smithsonian was acting dishonestly in approving Dr. Soon's grants or that the process used to approve those grants deviated from the policies it used to approve grants supporting the work of other scientists at the Center for Astrophysics.

## **“Fossil Fuel Interests” Fund All Points of View**

Objective evidence shows “fossil fuel interests” fund many different research programs and institutions that have weighed in on all sides of the global warming debate. The grants made to the Smithsonian to support Dr. Soon’s work are very small in comparison to grants made to other research organizations.

Exxon-Mobil donated \$100 million to support Stanford University climate research. General Electric also funds Stanford University climate research. Prominent Stanford University climate researchers include Sally Benson, Noah Diffenbaugh, Chris Field, and Stephen Schneider (now deceased). Each of these scientists has advocated reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Three of the four have held prominent positions with government research institutions such as the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Similarly, the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation donated \$150,000 to Berkeley Earth, a project run by Richard Mueller, a climate scientist who argues humans are causing substantial global warming.

Large “fossil fuel” companies also give sizeable donations to activist groups who adamantly support carbon dioxide restrictions. Chesapeake Energy gave \$26 million to the Sierra Club. BP is a founding member of the Climate Action Partnership. Shell Oil funds the Nature Conservancy. The list of fossil fuel companies and industry groups funding groups supporting carbon dioxide restrictions is nearly endless.

Given this context, why is there sudden interest in the potential of grants to the Smithsonian from some of these same sources, though in much smaller amounts, influencing the research of Dr. Soon? The Smithsonian’s ruling in this regard is consistent with the experience of scientists at Stanford, Berkeley Earth, and various activist groups who have similarly accepted “fossil fuel” money. The decisions by editors of peer-reviewed journals to publish the work of scholars associated with these institutions is also consistent with the decision of those and other journals to publish the work of Dr. Soon and his coauthors.

## **No Other Grant Recipients Claim Conflicts**

Few if any scientists working for universities and other research organizations receiving funding from “fossil fuel interests” report the grants to the editors of scholarly journals when they submit their articles for publication. Such grants almost never appear in “acknowledgements” of published articles, even when the authors are widely known to have received funding directly from companies and advocacy groups with commercial interests in the debate.

Based on my admittedly incomplete review, I have not found a single scientist at Stanford University, Berkeley Earth, or other research institutions that have received “fossil fuel” grants who has disclosed such funding in his or her research paper.

Accordingly, the standard for disclosure proposed by Greenpeace, and which the media has widely condemned Dr. Soon for “violating,” in fact is a new and unprecedented standard that few if any scientists, journal editors, or university administrators have ever applied. Worse, Greenpeace is calling for it to be applied retroactively and selectively, against a single scholar whose views are at odds with Greenpeace’s declared views on a controversial topic.

There is no logical justification for arguing Dr. Soon should have been aware that such a new standard would be invented and applied to him alone. Without such logical justification, it is preposterous to claim Dr. Soon violated ethical guidelines.

Many prominent scientists on the alarmist side of the global warming debate benefit from grants from foundations and corporations that support carbon dioxide restrictions. None of these scientists appears to disclose such funding as conflicts of interest. For example, Dr. Joseph Romm is a paid staffer for the Center for American Progress, an organization funded by renewable power companies and renewable power lobbying groups that has been outspoken in its advocacy for emissions reductions and public investment in renewable energy.

Even though Dr. Romm recently coauthored a paper published in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature* that expresses concern about global warming (and therefore benefits the low-carbon energy companies that fund his employer and his work), Dr. Romm and his coauthors made no disclosure of this funding. Anthony Watts writes of the case,

There was no COI [conflict of interest] disclosure whatsoever associated with this paper. The 53 authors include (for example) Joe Romm, Hal Harvey and Amory Lovins each of whom had massive undisclosed financial COI (obviously and easily documented) associated with renewable energy and political advocacy. No doubt other co-authors do as well. Further, several of these co-authors have also testified before Congress without COI disclosure.<sup>1</sup>

Watts goes on to make two points:

1. The lack of COI disclosure in this case does not mean that the paper is in any way in error.
2. The lack of COI disclosure in this case does not in any way justify or excuse similar lack of COI disclosure by Willie Soon. But it does point to the incredible selectivity of outrage in standards of COI disclosure, e.g., as applied by the NYT and US Congress. The Soon case and the example here are exactly parallel.

Similarly, Dr. Michael Oppenheimer has longtime ties with the Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental advocacy group that receives generous grants from foundations urging carbon dioxide restrictions. Much of the foundation grant money, moreover, originates from

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://wattsupwiththat.com/2015/02/27/faux-outrage-over-willie-soons-disclosure-joe-romm-failed-to-disclose-his-political-financial-ties-in-a-scientific-paper/>

corporations whose spokespersons similarly argue for carbon dioxide restrictions. In the dozens of papers Dr. Oppenheimer has published in the peer-reviewed literature, there are no disclosures of potential conflicts of interest.

Another example: Dr. Michael Mann reportedly charges up to \$10,000 to deliver talks on global warming. Dr. Mann does not publicly disclose who has paid him such princely sums for his talks, but it appears highly likely – indeed, almost certain – that corporations that support carbon dioxide restrictions are among his direct or indirect funders. In the dozens of papers Dr. Mann has published in the peer-reviewed literature, there are no disclosures of potential conflicts of interest. Moreover, Dr. Mann receives his money directly from the funding companies and has even retained an agent to help him secure such funding.

Ironically, Greenpeace itself violates the novel ethical standard it seeks to impose on Dr. Soon. Greenpeace receives funding from foundations and individuals that support carbon dioxide reductions and a wide range of environmental restrictions. Many of Greenpeace’s individual donors presumably are connected to the renewable energy industry and stand to profit if Greenpeace successfully argues for a global warming crisis and other environmental shortcomings. Greenpeace’s in-house scientists have written or coauthored dozens of articles for peer-reviewed journals raising concern about global warming and other environmental issues. There is no record of Greenpeace’s in-house scientists ever declaring in their papers that Greenpeace’s agenda-driven funding represents a conflict of interest.

Any attempt to require Dr. Soon to declare Smithsonian funding as a conflict of interest must hold Dr. Romm, Dr. Oppenheimer, Dr. Mann, Greenpeace itself, and others accountable for their acceptance of “tainted” funds and their failure to report such funding as conflicts of interest.

## **Conclusion**

Greenpeace’s campaign against Dr. Soon and other scientists who question its views on global warming is designed to exploit the public’s lack of awareness of the role institutions like the Smithsonian Institution and the editors of peer-reviewed journals play in protecting researchers and readers from undisclosed conflicts of interest. Dr. Soon’s affiliation with the Smithsonian, to which he surrenders some 40 percent of grant money the institution raises in his name, tells journal editors, his peers, and the general public that his research is honest and reliable.

Hundreds of scientists who support reducing carbon dioxide emissions work for organizations that receive funding from corporations, foundations, or government agencies that have publicly stated financial or ideological interests in the climate change debate, yet few if any of these scientists report any conflicts of interest. If Dr. Soon is guilty of failing to report potential conflicts of interest, then all these scientists are also guilty.

In fact, Greenpeace’s disclosure standard is fictitious. Greenpeace simply invented it in an attempt to smear and demonize Dr. Soon and other scientists like him. It’s very disappointing that such a cheap trick would fool so many journalists, but perhaps some of them wanted to be fooled.

Allegations that Dr. Willie Soon violated ethical standards by receiving grants from “fossil fuel interests” and failing to report the grants as conflicts of interest fail on the grounds of facts, logic, standard scientific practice, and consistency.

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**James M. Taylor** is vice president for external relations and senior fellow for environment and energy policy at The Heartland Institute. Taylor was managing editor (2001–2014) of *Environment & Climate News*, a national monthly publication devoted to sound science and free-market environmentalism. Taylor writes a weekly column for *Forbes* that appears on the magazine’s Forbes.com website.

Taylor has presented energy and environment analysis on CNN, CNN Headline News, Fox News Channel, Fox Business Channel, MSNBC, PBS News Hour, PBS Frontline, CBS Evening News, ABC World News and other TV and radio outlets across the country. Taylor has also been published in virtually every major newspaper in the country.

He has been a featured presenter at conferences sponsored by such groups as the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Council of State Governments, the National Association of Counties, the National Foundation of Women Legislators, the State Policy Network (SPN), CPAC, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the European Institute for Climate and Energy.

Taylor received his bachelor’s degree from Dartmouth College, where he studied atmospheric science and majored in government. He received his Juris Doctorate from Syracuse University.