

grid so that not everyone is relying on a handful of powerplants that can go down. Decentralized energy resources operating in microgrids are more likely to remain functioning during and after storms. There are many instances of distributed energy keeping important facilities online after natural disasters, including the Texas Medical Center, which is the largest medical complex in the world, which has a combined heat and power plant that kept running during Hurricane Harvey. That is because during extreme weather, these technologies can go into island mode or operate independent of the grid.

Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have some of the highest electricity prices in the United States, and that is because they rely on oil, coal, and gas that must be shipped from the mainland. While these islands do not have fossil fuels, do you know what they do have? Lots of Sun. And the rapidly declining costs of distributed clean energy technologies such as solar, wind, energy efficiency, and battery storage, in many instances make them more affordable than existing power generation, which means these clean energy technologies could help reduce prices.

These investments will also save money in the long run. In 2005, the National Institute of Building Sciences completed a study for FEMA that found that every dollar invested in disaster preparedness and resilience saves \$4 in future avoided losses. We know we are going to see more hurricanes and extreme weather events, so let's rebuild in such a way that impacts are not as severe the next time around. Let's protect people and save taxpayer money.

That is my message: Let's protect people, and let's all save taxpayer money and do the thing that makes sense.

Thank you.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, it is nice to see the distinguished Senator in the chair presiding. I am not sure, in my 183 “Time to Wake Up” speeches, I have yet had the pleasure of speaking while the Senator was presiding.

I am here to once again call for us to wake up to the corporate capture of Congress and this administration—the capture of governance by the fossil fuel industry that keeps us from honestly addressing climate change. There is a saying that “personnel is policy.” Well, the Trump personnel for positions at the Environmental Protection Agency reflect a policy to undo the public welfare mission of the Agency and align it

with the special interests of the fossil fuel industry.

There is a word for that. It is called corruption, at least as the Founding Fathers knew the meaning of that term. It starts at the top. Trump named Scott Pruitt head of the EPA. Pruitt has a long record of dark money fundraising and long, cozy relationships with Big Energy industry political donors. In effect, he is a tentacle of the fossil fuel climate denial operation, wiggling and wriggling in the Administrator's chair, near his new \$25,000 “cone of silence” secret communications booth that he built so no one would hear him checking in with his masters.

Results are as expected. The New York Times has reported: “How Rollbacks at Scott Pruitt's EPA are a Boon to Oil and Gas.” No surprise. In the 4 months that followed his appointment, Pruitt moved to undo, delay, or otherwise block more than 30 environmental rules benefiting his fossil fuel friends. This regulatory rollback, larger in scope than any over so short a time in the Agency's near-half century history, went straight into the pockets of the fossil fuel industry.

Longtime Pruitt benefactor Devon Energy is cashing in dividends on its investment in Scott Pruitt's political career, as Pruitt is working to eliminate rules on the leaking and flaring of methane, and has rescinded requirements for reporting methane emissions. Devon, as you may recall, is that company whose letter to the EPA Pruitt put on his own Oklahoma attorney general letterhead to mask Devon's hand and submit their work as his own official work as attorney general of his State.

So this hand-in-glove relationship between Devon as the hand and Pruitt as the glove goes back a long way. The EPA has career scientists and legal experts who bring decades of experience in environmental law and science to the EPA who are all being cut out as the Administrator takes drastic steps to undo environmental protections. Just this week, EPA scientists were yanked from a conference in Rhode Island where they were going to talk about climate change. The matter of climate change on Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island is pretty significant. This is the day's Providence Journal, our leading newspaper in Rhode Island. Headline: “Will climate change negate Bay cleanup?” It has a big map of Narragansett Bay with all the facilities at risk of being flooded and overwhelmed. It is front page news.

It is a matter of extreme importance in Rhode Island, and EPA yanked out its scientists. They weren't allowed to come down and talk at an event where they were going to talk about climate change. It is not just yanking the scientists. Here is a New York Times article by Lisa Friedman from October 20. Headline: “EPA scrubs a climate website of ‘climate change.’” An EPA website has been scrubbed of scores of

links. “About 15 mentions of the words climate change have been removed from the main page alone. . . .”

It is not just at EPA. Here is today's exclusive headline: “The Interior Department scrubs climate change from its strategic plan.” I mean, they act as if this is the Soviet Union and the government is allowed to tell scientists what they can say and not say and put phony propaganda onto official websites and keep scientists from going to meetings because they might actually tell the truth about climate change.

I am the son and grandson of Foreign Service officers. I grew up serving in countries that did that, where the government could tell the scientist: No, you don't say that. No, you don't go there. No, this is the party line. I never thought that would happen in the United States of America—and here we are.

To aid Pruitt in his fossil fuel industry crusade, our President has nominated a parade of fossil fuel lackeys, lobbyists, and operatives whose main qualification seems to be allegiance to their corporate clients and benefactors. It is not just the fossil fuel industry that gets their hacks planted in government offices.

Do you remember in the “Cat in the Hat,” where they had Thing One and Thing Two running around? Let's look at Hack One and Hack Two, who just cleared committee today in the Pruitt “EPA for Sale” roster.

Hack One is a toxicologist who consults for major chemical corporations and has spent the better part of his professional life fighting regulation of potentially toxic compounds in consumer goods. His name is Michael Dourson. President Trump nominated him to run the EPA Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention. A lobbying group for sellers of pesticides, fungicides, and rodenticides called Dourson “a perfect fit” for the job—the perfect industry hack for that job, more like.

Hack Two is William Wehrum, nominated to run the EPA Office of Air and Radiation. Wehrum is a lobbyist who has represented a host of major industrial and energy corporations, and the Rubber Manufacturers Association, the American Forest and Paper Association, and the American Petroleum Institute. President George W. Bush actually nominated this guy to the same post in 2006, but the White House withdrew his nomination because it was so controversial.

Well, that was 2006. That was before Citizens United. That was before that decision amped up industry power to the point where it can now ram through conflicted and objectionable candidates with—as happened this morning—unanimous Republican support. Not one Republican Senator on the committee would voice an objection.

When Senators asked questions for the record in the Environment and

Public Works Committee nomination hearing on Wehrum and Dourson, these captured nominees played dumb about the central issues and programs they will oversee if confirmed.

For instance, I asked Dourson if he agreed that “the tobacco industry manipulated and obfuscated scientific research into the dangers of smoking for decades.” Dourson, who conducted scientific studies designed, reviewed, and paid for by the tobacco industry and whose name is all over, in hundreds of places, the discovery records of the tobacco industry’s denial operation, replied: “I do not have firsthand knowledge to comment.”

I “do not have firsthand knowledge to comment”? This is the President’s selection to run the office that protects Americans from dangerous chemicals who doesn’t know the tobacco industry’s history of falsifying science? Please. He worked for them. He was part of it.

Remember that the tobacco industry was taken to court by the U.S. Department of Justice—back when the Department of Justice would take an industry to court—and the Department of Justice won a judgment declaring that tobacco had engaged in a fraud conspiracy to deny tobacco’s harms. Dourson sees no evil. He knows nothing.

I asked him whether he believes that hydrofluorocarbons are greenhouse gases and about the global warming potential of methane. His response: I am not sufficiently familiar with the definition of greenhouse gases and do not have the expertise to answer these questions.

He is not familiar with the definition of greenhouse gases? This is basic high school science. Every one of us has a home State university that teaches this stuff. This has been science for more than 100 years.

On to Hack Two, Bill Wehrum. When I asked Wehrum about carbon dioxide’s role in the observable effects of climate change, he replied: “The degree to which manmade greenhouse gas emissions are contributing to climate change has not been conclusively determined.” This claim just doesn’t match the scientific record.

The EPA—the very Agency to which Mr. Wehrum is nominated, along with NOAA—states that “carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas that is contributing to recent climate change.” This consensus is held by published climate scientists, by scientific agencies and societies, by all of our National Laboratories, and by universities in America and around the globe.

As I said, every one of us in this room—I haven’t found an exception yet, and I have looked, but I expect every Senator has a home State university that doesn’t just know this to be true, but it teaches it in its curriculum. But Hack Two sees no evil. He knows nothing.

Wehrum’s disregard for well-established science provides a grim preview

of what we can expect from him if confirmed. His predictable dodging falls in lockstep with Administrator Pruitt, who has stated he does “not agree that [carbon dioxide] is a primary contributor to the global warming that we see.” That puts him in a very small circle of people, every one of whom I think is connected by money to the fossil fuel industry.

I asked Mr. Wehrum what he believes is a healthy standard for ozone. Now, bear in mind that one of the goals of the Clean Air Act is to set national ambient air quality standards for ozone, that the office to which he is nominated oversees this ozone standard, and that the EPA has had ozone standards in place since 1971, more than 45 years.

In response to my question, Wehrum answered: “I am not familiar with the current science on the health effects of ozone, so I cannot comment on your question as to the appropriate level of the standard.” Really?

I asked Wehrum whether he agreed with EPA’s 2009 finding that the current and projected concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations. I asked if he would commit not to narrow or weaken the EPA’s endangerment finding. Wehrum wrote back that he had not read the endangerment finding or the record prepared in support of the finding; therefore, he said: “I currently do not have a view.” I currently do not have a view? That is funny.

I bet he had a view when he was being paid by the Rubber Manufacturers Association, the American Forest & Paper Association, and the American Petroleum Institute. I guess it was the miraculous, evaporating view.

Maybe these “see no evil” nominees, Dourson and Wehrum, don’t know the basics of the problems they would confront. Maybe they just don’t know, but let’s not be fooled here. Polluters have paid these nominees well for their services over the years. They were expert enough to be hired by industry groups as lobbyists and consultants. We know where their allegiances lie. We know who has been paying them. We know whom they will serve.

A preview of coming attractions, coming up before the EPW soon is Andrew Wheeler, Trump’s nominee for the EPA’s second in command. Wheeler was a top lobbyist for the coal mining behemoth, Murray Energy. Not only did this company support Trump’s campaign and provide \$300,000 to help pay for his inauguration, Murray Energy has also donated to Pruitt-affiliated political action committees to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. I can’t wait to hear his answers on the role of coal in climate change, childhood asthma, and mercury poisoning.

The sad part of all of this is, the polluting interests that own these nominees also throw their weight around in

Congress. So good luck getting an honest look at this mess through congressional oversight.

Over and over, appalling nominees get through confirmation with no Republican dissent, more “see no evil.” It is just wrong.

For now, the American public will pay the price of dismantling these regulatory safeguards. They will pay the price in poisonings and carcinogenic exposures, in rising seas and raging wildfires, in childhood asthma and northbound tropical diseases. Mark my words, one day there will be a reckoning for all of this.

When captured EPA officials put payback to their donors first and clean air and public health a way distant second, it stinks. It is crooked by any reasonable definition of the term. It is corrupt in exactly the way the Founding Fathers understood corruption.

The fossil fuel industry will one day be held to account for this binge of corruption and manipulation. ExxonMobil, Koch Industries, Arch Coal, Murray Coal, Peabody Coal, you own this just as the Republican Party does.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Colorado.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I come to the floor this afternoon to talk about the Healthcare Tax Relief Act, legislation I introduced to delay the health insurance tax that was created by the Affordable Care Act.

This tax is often referred to as the HIT tax. The HIT tax imposes fees on health insurance coverage to consumers. It is a pretty simple business concept that this HIT tax results in. If a fee increases on an insurance policy and the fee goes up—there is a fee charged to the company that issues this insurance policy—then that fee gets passed on to the consumer. It is the consumer, then, who pays the fee in the form of higher health insurance costs.

As is the case with most excise taxes, whether it is an excise tax on food or beverage or any other item of personal good, if this health insurance tax takes effect, costs will be passed on to consumers directly in the form of higher premiums. That is confirmed by the Congressional Budget Office.

This is one of the cost drivers that was built into the Affordable Care Act. This health insurance tax would directly increase the premiums of the consumer’s insurance product. This tax was supposed to begin a few years back in 2014. It was going to start at \$8 billion, and by 2018 the tax would reach \$14.3 billion. However, Congress recognized that this tax was going to have a significant impact on the price of coverage and, as a result, suspended the tax from taking effect in 2017. Without congressional action to delay or stop or prevent this ObamaCare tax from taking place again, this tax will take effect in 2018.

According to nonpartisan actuarial analysis conducted by Oliver Wyman,