Most oil industry lobbyists in US worked for government

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A *Washington Post* story published Wednesday highlighted data from the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) that further demonstrates the incestuous relationship between the US government and the oil industry. Of the more than 600 lobbyists employed by the oil and gas industry in Washington, the article reveals, 430 once had jobs in the legislative or executive branch of government.

The *Post* notes that among the 430 oil and gas industry lobbyists who once worked in government are 18 former members of Congress (15 of whom are from oil-producing states), dozens of former presidential appointees, 2 former directors of Minerals Management Service (MMS), several top officials from the Bush White House, former federal inspectors, and aides and staffers to numerous congressmen and women.

The CRP numbers show that the oil and gas industry's 600 lobbyists are one of the largest lobbying groups, and that its nearly $175 million spent on lobbying in 2009 was the third highest of all industries represented in Washington.

BP, responsible for the oil spill that is poisoning the Gulf of Mexico, is a particularly powerful player on Capitol Hill, what the CRP categorizes as a "heavy hitter." The CRP's website, OpenSecrets.org, details the multitude of ways the company attempts to influence government.

In 2009, BP spent nearly $16 million on lobbying and has spent $3.5 million this year, as of April 25, second only to ConocoPhillips in the oil industry. Of BP's 37 lobbyists, 27 are shown to have worked within government in some capacity. BP-paid lobbyists have exerted influence on 13 different congressional bills just this year.

During the 2008 election cycle, BP gave more money to the Obama campaign, over $71,000, than to any other politician. Also listed among the top recipients of BP money are John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Mary Landrieu, Ted Stevens and Ron Paul.

The lobbying firm Podesta Group, run by Tony Podesta, also received BP money. Tony is the brother of John Podesta, a former White House chief of staff for Bill Clinton and co-chair of the Obama transition team. Employed by the Podesta Group and paid by BP is Hewitt Strange, a former field assistant to Democratic senator Mary Landrieu from Louisiana. Strange is one of at least three current lobbyists who formerly worked for Landrieu.

CRP also shows Landrieu's campaign committee to have received $17,000 from BP during the 2008 election cycle. She has shown her loyalty to the industry by vigorously opposing President Obama's largely symbolic deepwater oil drilling moratorium. According to the *Post*:

"During a June hearing, Landrieu warned Interior Secretary Ken Salazar that a prolonged halt to deep-water drilling 'could potentially wreak economic havoc on this region that exceeds the havoc wreaked' by the spill itself. Later that evening, Landrieu held her annual 'Crawfish Fest' fundraiser, and its hosts included seven oil industry lobbyists—six of whom previously worked on Capitol Hill, the invitation shows."

BP and the oil industry's generosity towards the Obama administration has also been rewarded. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, who has longstanding ties to the oil industry, hired as his deputy assistant secretary Sylvia Baca, a former executive for BP.

Obama Energy Secretary Steven Chu headed a research institute at the University of California, Berkeley, which was funded by BP with a $500 million grant. On becoming energy secretary, Chu selected

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BP’s chief scientist, Steven Koonin, to be the Department of Energy undersecretary for science. (See: “Behind the Gulf oil crisis: Big Oil extends its political influence”)

Another big spender on lobbyists in Washington is the leading trade group for the oil and gas industry, the American Petroleum Institute (API). CRP numbers show that the API spent $7.32 million in 2009, and employs 48 lobbyists who formerly worked in government in some capacity. Among these 48 is former Democratic senator J. Bennett Johnston, who, the *Post* notes, helped deregulate the natural gas industry.

The *Post* report singles out the MMS (now the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, or BOEMRE) as being a prime recruiting ground for oil and gas industry lobbying firms. Over a dozen former MMS employees are currently employed in the oil industry.

Former employees and lobbyists in the oil and gas industry also frequently find their way into government agencies, such as BOEMRE. New BOEMRE director Michael Bromwich told the *Post* that he “acknowledged conflicts in the inspecting ranks...and said new procedures aim to prevent employees from conducting inspections of former employers.”

There is no clear line of division between the government and the oil industry—the *Post* story and the CRP data contribute to the ever-mounting evidence of this fact. Under this arrangement, the oil industry has been left to regulate itself. Combined with the blind drive for profit, the result has been catastrophic.

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