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Smoked Out

by Paul D. Thacker

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In his final column of the year, *FoxNews.com* science columnist Steven Milloy listed "THE TOP 10 JUNK SCIENCE CLAIMS OF 2005." For number nine, Milloy attacked the research of Michael Mann, a Penn State scientist who, in 1999, published research showing a dramatic rise in global temperatures during the twentieth century, after hundreds of years with little climate change. Calling Mann's science "dubious," Milloy praised Representative Joe Barton of Texas, whose calls for an investigation into Mann's methodology last June were cut short when the scientific community and members of Congress protested it as a witch hunt. Representative Sherwood Boehlert, the chairman of the House Committee on Science, wrote to Barton, "The only conceivable explanation for the investigation is to attempt to intimidate a prominent scientist and to have Congress put its thumbs on the scales of a scientific debate."

Another conceivable explanation for the investigation is that Barton, as chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, is swimming in donations from oil companies. But that probably didn't bother Milloy, because he receives his own sponsorship from ExxonMobil. As revealed in *Mother Jones* last spring, between 2000 and 2003, ExxonMobil donated \$90,000 to two nonprofits Milloy operates out of his house in Potomac, Maryland. Milloy's defense of Barton--and excoriation of Mann--is typical of his corporate-subsidized science reporting, in which he has attacked not only global warming, but also secondhand smoke studies and clean air regulations.

Over the past year, there have been several instances of political columnists shilling for the Bush administration. In January 2005, Tribune Media Services booted Armstrong Williams after discovering he had taken a government contract to write columns favorable to Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. And, in December, Copley News Service dropped Doug Bandow after discovering that he was taking money from Jack Abramoff to write columns favorable to the Republican lobbyist's clients. But the trend in paid-for-punditry seems to have spread to the world of science journalism as well. Earlier this month, *BusinessWeek Online* reported that, in 1999, Scripps Howard columnist Michael Fumento received \$60,000 from Monsanto, one of the biotech companies he later covered in his columns, to help pay his salary at the Hudson Institute and to cover some of the overhead of his book *BioEvolution*.

Fumento had not disclosed the Monsanto money to Scripps Howard.

But, whereas Scripps Howard fired Fumento and apologized to its readers, Fox News continues to look the other way as Milloy accepts corporate handouts. And it's not just the ExxonMobil money. Milloy has a long history of taking payment from industries that have a stake in the science stories he writes. The ethical standards are clear. "Not disclosing this is wrong," says Tom Rosenstiel, the director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. The real question, then, is why Fox News continues to employ Milloy. Or, in the words of James Hansen, a climate scientist and the head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, "The question is, 'Why does a major news organization employ such a hack?'"

Milloy has been affiliated with *FoxNews.com* since July 2000. On March 9, 2001, he wrote a column for the website headlined "SECONDHAND SMOKESCREEN." The piece attacked a study by researcher Stephen Hecht, who found that women living with smokers had higher levels of chemicals associated with risk of lung cancer. "If spin were science, Hecht would win a Nobel Prize," Milloy wrote. For good measure, he heaped scorn on a 1993 Environmental Protection Agency report that also linked health risks and secondhand smoke. Later that spring, he authored another smoking-related piece for *FoxNews.com*. In that one, he cast aside two decades of research on the dangers of exposure to secondhand smoke and concluded, "Secondhand smoke is annoying to many nonsmokers. That is the essence of the controversy and where the debate should lie—the rights of smokers to smoke in public places versus the rights of nonsmokers to be free of tobacco smoke." You might chalk it up to Milloy's contrarian nature. Or to his libertarian tendencies. Except, all the while, he was on the payroll of big tobacco. According to Lisa Gonzalez, manager of external communications for Altria, the parent company of Philip Morris, Milloy was under contract there through the end of last year. "In 2000 and 2001, some of the work he did was to monitor studies, and then we would distribute this information within to our different companies," Gonzalez said. Although she couldn't comment on fees paid to Milloy, a January 2001 Philip Morris budget report lists Milloy as a consultant and shows that he was budgeted for \$92,500 in fees and expenses in both 2000 and 2001. Asked about Milloy's tobacco ties, Paul Schur, director of media relations for Fox News, said, "Fox News is unaware of Milloy's connection with Philip Morris. Any affiliation he had should have been disclosed." Milloy could not be reached for comment.

Yet it's all in the public record. The University of California at San Francisco maintains a database of seven million tobacco industry documents made public as part of the 1998 settlement between tobacco companies and state attorneys general. According to those documents, Milloy's relationship to big tobacco goes back at least to March 1997, when he took over as executive director of The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), a front group established in 1993 by Philip Morris and p.r. firm APCO Associates "to expand and assist Philip Morris in its efforts with issues in targeted states." (Fumento was on the organization's advisory board.) Under Milloy, TASSC sought to debunk a range of scientific theories that ran counter to the conservative viewpoint, from the dangers of breast implants to the need for stricter clean air standards. Philip Morris remained heavily invested in these efforts. A 1997 Philip Morris budget report includes a line item granting TASSC \$200,000. As executive director, Milloy also reached out to other allies

within the industry. For instance, in September 1997, he sent a letter to Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation soliciting \$50,000: "The grant will be used to further TASSC's efforts to educate the public, media and policymakers on priorities in public health," he wrote.

The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition is now defunct. But one of Milloy's nonprofits has the same acronym and a remarkably similar name: The Advancement of Sound Science Center. His Free Enterprise Action Institute also has tobacco links, with Thomas Borelli--a longtime Philip Morris executive--serving as its secretary.

It has become increasingly hard to defend tobacco or attack smoking studies, which is probably why Milloy's more recent targets have included climate scientists like Mann. "Tobacco has lost most of these battles, but there is still opportunity to spread doubt about global warming," says David Michaels, the chair of the Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy at George Washington University. Corporations with a stake in the global warming debate have been distributing their funds accordingly: Of the \$3,056,783 raised in 2003 by the libertarian think tank Competitive Enterprise Institute (where Milloy is an unpaid adjunct analyst), \$465,000 came from ExxonMobil. Milloy and Borelli's latest enterprise is a mutual fund that seeks to counter pressure from environmental activists promoting corporate social responsibility.

Fox News can't be expected to dig through the tobacco legacy documents every time one of its columnists writes about smoking issues. But, as far as Milloy, Fox News should be judged the same way tobacco companies were during their trials: What did they know, and when did they know it? Fox News has certainly known since last spring that money from ExxonMobil was going to Milloy's home-based charities. Perhaps the real reason the news organization tolerates Milloy is that his pro-industry, anti-environmentalist views dovetail nicely with those of its political commentators. Still, this misses an important distinction. Objective viewers long ago realized that Fox News has a political agenda. But, when a pundit promotes this agenda while on the take from corporations that benefit from it, then Fox News has gone one disturbing step further.

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