

# Fossil Fuel Industry Controls Federal Policy

by Bill McKibben

It's time to say, straight out, why we're in trouble — why, on the issue that means the most to me, we've made absolutely no progress in our country in dealing with climate change. It's not because of the science — scientists have been all but unanimous about the danger. It's not for lack of popular will — the polling consistently shows Americans want action and are even willing to pay more for energy. The reason is fairly simple: the power of the fossil fuel industry to stall change. Big energy is the 1% of the 1% — it's the most profitable enterprise in the history of business.

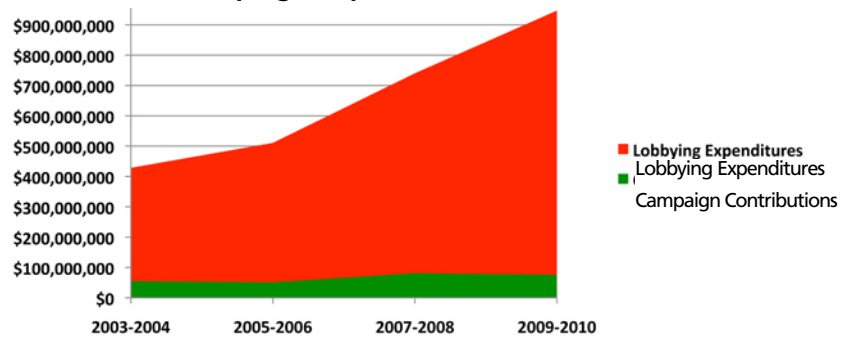
Here's what I mean in practical terms. Many of you joined in the fight against the Keystone Pipeline this past fall, because that pipeline would help crack open the tar sands of Canada, the second-biggest source of carbon on the planet. Out in the open, we had a chance; we used the tools of democracy to foster a debate. Over 1200 people were arrested in the largest display of civil disobedience in this country in 30 years; 12,000 circled the White House. 500,000 wrote public comments on the pipeline, the most for any energy project in the nation's history. And we actually won a temporary delay, which is about as big a victory as environmentalists ever win.

But as soon as Congress returned to DC, the power of big oil went to work. The head of the American Petroleum Institute threatened "huge political consequences" for anyone who blocked the pipeline. But it wasn't just sticks, they had plenty of carrots too. The House voted 234-193 to speed up the pipeline again — and those 234 ayes had taken \$42 million in contributions from the fossil fuel industry. That is simply not fair. It wouldn't be fair if it was your daughter's middle school gymnastics meet. You should not take money from companies and then vote on their interests.

Which is why, on the Monday Congress reconvened in January, hundreds of us were outside Congress, wearing referee uniforms. We wanted to blow the whistle, as it were, on the collusion between business and politics that is wrecking, among many other things, the planet's atmosphere.

But I want to speak for a moment not as an organizer but as a writer. There's a deeper reason to be angry at decisions like Citizens United, one that as a writer seems important to me. And that's that it tells a lie. Corporations aren't people. They're not evil, necessarily, but they are simple. People are complicated — we have instincts, emotions, relationships. We can see back into the past, and

## Energy/Natural Resource Industry Lobbying and Campaign Expenditures 2003-2010



Over the past decade, energy and natural resource corporations doubled their spending to control federal policy on energy issues. As the dangers of global warming and climate change became more apparent — with Pacific islands inundated by the oceans and devastating hurricanes taking lives around the world — these corporations spent \$2.6 billion from 2003 to 2010 to stymie all efforts to create a coherent national policy that directly confronts the impending global disaster caused by the fossil fuel industry. As the chart above shows, while the industry spent \$262 million in campaign contributions over that period, they spent over ten times as much, \$2.3 billion, on lobbying our legislators, public servants and judiciary to make sure that no significant federal policy could be formed to counteract the impacts of climate change..

data: [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

imagine far into the future. We have children, and friends, which help us take the focus off ourselves. We often act badly, but we also often act unexpectedly — deep and mysterious creations like art and religion help make us unpredictable, sometimes even to ourselves. Corporations, on the other hand, are the model of simplicity. If they were organisms, they'd be more like single-celled flagellates on a petri dish, wiggling their way to the sugar on one edge. They exist to maximize profit, and they are good at it; hence, properly regulated, they can be a useful force in a society. But unregulated, or given the political power to in essence regulate themselves, they become problems precisely because they aren't like people. The Supreme Court has, repeatedly, made an error in its thinking, a kind of category mistake. Clearly it's up to us to set them right.

*Bill McKibben has authored a dozen books on the environment, beginning with The End of Nature in 1989. He is a founder of the grassroots climate campaign [350.org](http://350.org), which has coordinated 15,000 rallies in 189 countries since 2009.*



Refugees fleeing inundated Pacific Islands photo: Climate Refugees

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