



Oil and Gas Industry Investments in the National Rifle Association and Safari Club International

Reshaping American Energy, Land, and Wildlife Policy

By Matt Lee-Ashley April 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Two bedrock principles have guided the work and advocacy of American sportsmen for more than a century. First, under the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, wildlife in the United States is considered a public good to be conserved for everyone and accessible to everyone, not a commodity that can be bought and owned by the highest bidder.¹ Second, since President Theodore Roosevelt's creation of the first wildlife refuges and national forests, sportsmen have fought to protect wildlife habitat from development and fragmentation to ensure healthy game supplies.

These two principles, however, are coming under growing fire from an aggressive and coordinated campaign funded by the oil and gas industry.

As part of a major effort since 2008 to bolster its lobbying and political power, the oil and gas industry has steadily expanded its contributions and influence over several major conservative sportsmen's organizations, including Safari Club International, or SCI, the National Rifle Association, or NRA, and the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. The first two organizations have assumed an increasingly active and vocal role in advancing energy industry priorities, even when those positions are in apparent conflict with the interests of hunters and anglers who are their rank-and-file members. The third group, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, or CSF, is also heavily funded by oil and gas interests and plays a key role in providing energy companies, SCI, the NRA, gun manufacturers, and other corporate sponsors with direct access to members of Congress.

The growing influence of the oil and gas industry on these powerful groups is reshaping the politics, policies, and priorities of American land and wildlife conservation.

In this report, we identify three high-profile debates in which the growing influence of the oil and gas industry in SCI, CSF, the NRA and other conservative sportsmen groups could play a decisive role in achieving outcomes that are beneficial to energy companies at the expense of habitat protection, science-based management, and hunter and angler access to wildlife and public lands. These areas to watch are:

- Endangered and threatened wildlife in oil- and gas-producing regions: The case of the greater sage grouse and the lesser prairie chicken
- The backcountry: How the oil and gas industry and its allies are working to undo protections of roadless areas and wilderness study areas
- Public access and ownership: The movement to privatize public lands and wildlife

The oil and gas industry's growing investment in conservative sportsmen groups is already yielding ever-greater influence over legislation and policy decisions that benefit the industry's financial interests at the expense of hunters and anglers. Understanding and tracking this powerful lobbying alliance is of increasing importance to those who believe that American sportsmen can and should continue to be the standard-bearers for our nation's conservation tradition and champions for those who wish to defend the principles that have guided North American land and wildlife stewardship for more than a century.

Oil and gas industry investments in three major sportsmen groups

Since the 2008 presidential election, the oil and gas industry has expanded its investments in Congressional lobbying, political campaigns, and advertising to help advance and defend its policy agenda in Washington.

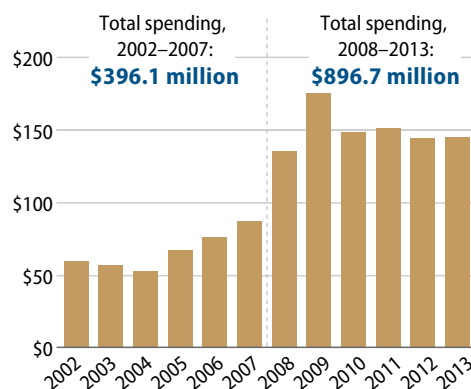
Between 2008 and 2013, the oil and gas industry spent \$898 million to lobby Congress, an increase of 127 percent over the previous six years.²

In 2012, fossil-fuel industries and their allies spent a record \$270 million on television advertising alone to help elect their preferred candidates, including \$176 million to defeat President Barack Obama.³ Since then, trade groups such as the American Petroleum Institute, or API, have spent millions more on so-called “branding” campaigns, which use television ads such as “I’m an Energy Voter” to create the impression of widespread popular support for the industry’s agenda.⁴ Taken together, these investments have helped defeat climate change legislation in Congress, preserve tax subsidies for oil and gas companies, slow and weaken environmental protection rules, and pressure federal officials to further expand and accelerate oil and gas leasing on public lands.

New evidence indicates that, as part of its policy and political strategy, the oil and gas industry is now also heavily investing in and influencing at least three of the nation’s most powerful sportsmen’s organizations: Safari Club International, the National Riflemen’s Association, and the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation. Together, at least 28 oil, gas, and energy companies have made financial investments in the NRA and CSF since 2010, and, although SCI does not list its corporate donors publicly, Federal Election Commission files show that the oil and gas industry is a major contributor to its political action committee.⁵ The contributions are so significant that oil and gas companies now represent as much as 28.5 percent of the NRA’s corporate giving program.⁶

FIGURE 1
Oil and gas industry federal lobbying spending

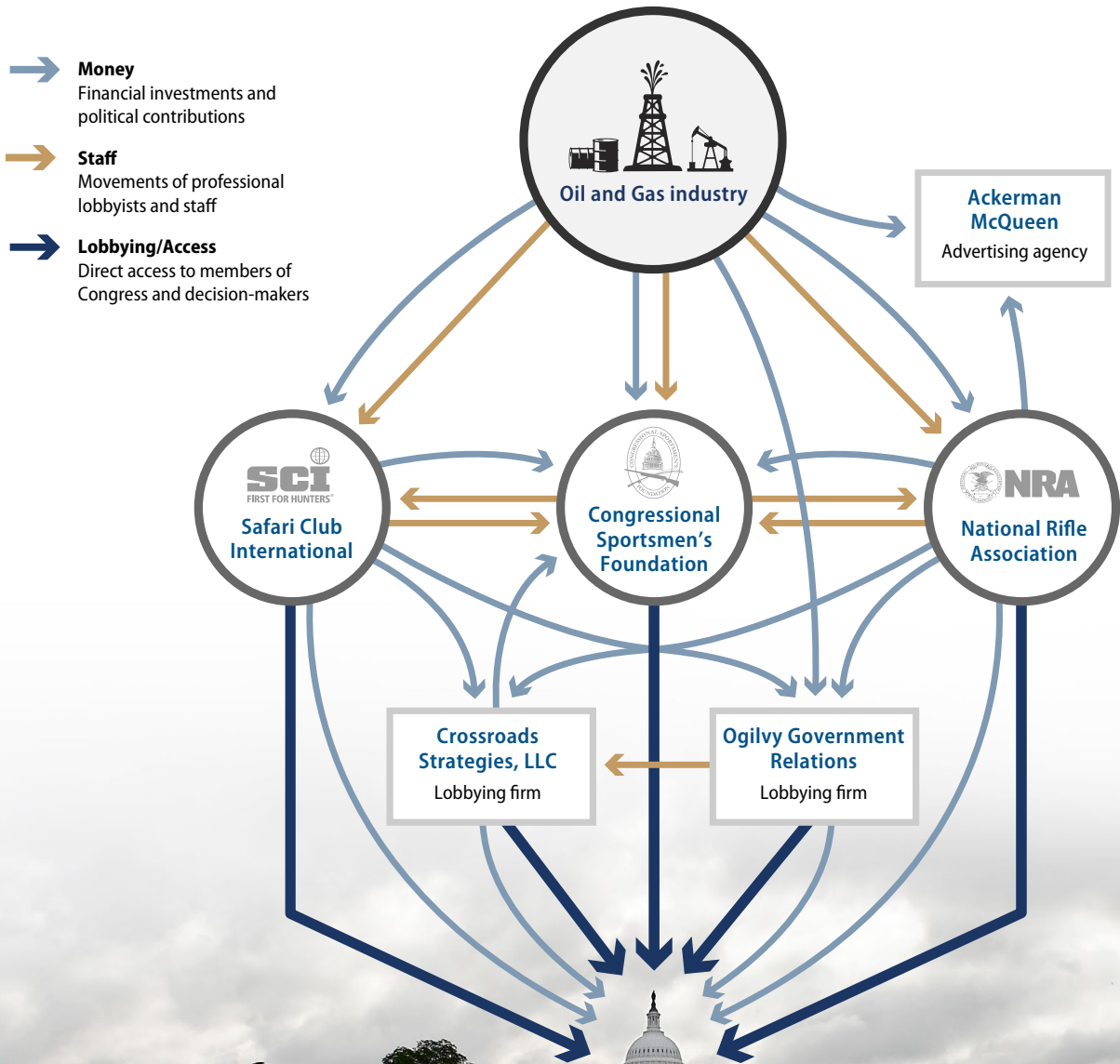
2002–2013, in millions of dollars



Source: Center for Responsive Politics, “OpenSecrets.Org: Oil & Gas,” available at <https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/indusclient.php?id=E01> (last accessed March 2014).

FIGURE 2
Oil and Gas industry influence through SCI, NRA, and CSF

The investments and staff movements that deliver access and lobbying power



It is important to note that because these three organizations do not publicly disclose their donors, it is difficult to measure the full extent of the oil and gas industry's investments in them. Nonetheless, a review of publicly available information reveals that oil and gas companies not only heavily finance these organizations, they are also closely connected to them through their boards, consultants, lobbyists, and a revolving door of staff, including former political appointees in the President George W. Bush administration. We found, for example, at least 10 individuals with oil and gas industry ties who have been playing prominent roles in and for the groups since 2010.⁷

Let's look at each group more closely.

Safari Club International

Safari Club International describes itself as “the leader in protecting the freedom to hunt and promoting wildlife conservation worldwide.” With 55,000 members, it is smaller than other hunter and gun-rights organizations such as the NRA—which has 5 million members—and international wildlife conservation organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund—which also has 5 million members.⁸ Yet SCI plays a prominent role in U.S. and international wildlife debates.

SCI International was formed in 1972 as an association of independent safari clubs across the country, primarily representing individuals interested in hunting large, iconic game species around the world. Among its activities, the organization sponsors contests through which hunters can win awards for completing various so-called “Grand Slams” of trophy game. To win an award for the “Dangerous Game of Africa Grand Slam,” for example, a member must kill an African lion, an African leopard, an African elephant, an African rhinoceros, a hippopotamus, a crocodile, and an African buffalo.⁹ SCI also gives awards for other grand slams, including for “Cats of the World,” “Bears of the World,” and “South American indigenous animals.”¹⁰

On the policy front, SCI has campaigned to loosen restrictions on the importation of hunting trophies and worked to reduce what it terms “unnecessary burdens” on the transport of firearms for hunters who are traveling internationally.¹¹ It has weighed in against listing the polar bear as an endangered species under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and lobbied to weaken protections on endangered African elephants under the Convention on the International Trade of

Together, at least 28 oil, gas, and energy companies have made financial investments in the NRA and CSF since 2010, and, although SCI does not list its corporate donors publicly, Federal Election Commission files show that the oil and gas industry is a major contributor to its political action committee.

Endangered Species, or CITES.¹² In January, the SCI-affiliated Dallas Safari Club was criticized for auctioning off a permit to hunt endangered black rhinoceros in Namibia for \$350,000.¹³ The Dallas Safari Club reported that the proceeds from the permit would be given to the government of Namibia and dedicated to wildlife conservation.¹⁴

Motivating SCI's policy and advocacy strategy seems to be the conviction that the rights of hunters are under attack in a "global battle" with "antis" who want to "strip you of your rights and hunting heritage"—a position that is expressed on its website and in the communications of its leadership. In a posting titled "Battle Strategy," Craig Kaufmann, the president of SCI, writes that to counter its opponents, "we must form our own strategic alliances and partnerships, and consolidate like-minded groups in the ever-growing battle against the anti-hunting movement."¹⁵

First among SCI's strategic partnerships is the oil and gas industry, and the partnership is spearheaded by Melissa Simpson, SCI's director of government affairs and science-based conservation. Simpson came to SCI from Pac/West Communications in 2011, where she was the vice president of policy and regulatory affairs. Prior to that, she was a political appointee in President George W. Bush's administration at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of the Interior.¹⁶

Pac/West Communications advertises itself as a lobbying, marketing, and public relations firm.¹⁷ According to news reports, Pac/West, "a company with conservative Republican ties,"¹⁸ gained attention for its unsuccessful efforts to "convince residents in four other states to support drill-here, drill-now candidates who would help turn the tide on (proposals to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) in Washington."¹⁹ These efforts included the creation of an Astroturf group—an industry-backed fake grassroots organization—called Americans for American Energy, which served as a "message center for pushing Congress to approve opening up the (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) for drilling."²⁰

At Pac/West, Simpson advertised her ability to use her relationships with sportsmen and with the energy industry to, as she put it, "create opportunities for partnerships that lead to on the ground results: access and wildlife habitat for sportsmen; certainty for industry."²¹ Simpson's clients at Pac/West were reported to be the oil and gas industry and, according to published reports, "one of her assignments was to counter the concerns about oil and gas exploration running roughshod over America's hunting and fishing grounds."²²

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Among Simpson's clients was the Independent Petroleum Association of the Mountain States, or IPAMS, a trade group representing oil and gas producers in western United States. According to an internal document released by the organization, Simpson worked for IPAMS—which changed its name to the Western Energy Alliance in 2010²³—until 2009. According to the document titled “Wildlife Committee Meeting Minutes” and dated May 1, 2009:

IPAMS has hired Melissa Simpson with Pac/West on a retainer basis through 2009. Melissa's efforts will include advocating on behalf of industry during Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) meetings, improving communication with state and fish and wildlife agencies through an organized industry effort, and facilitating a dialog to mutually share information with the goal of pre-development planning and monitoring. ... Melissa and IPAMS staff met with companies that have agreed to fund and participate in this initiative on April 7th to discuss next steps. ... Special thanks to the five companies (Bill Barrett Cor., Fidelity, Newfield, Pioneer, and Questar) that have agreed to fund this initiative.²⁴

Among Simpson's reported tasks for IPAMS was to counter the protests that sportsmen groups file on proposed oil and gas projects that could damage wildlife habitat. Simpson's contract, says the IPAMS document, will “serve as a tool to address wildlife protests from the Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, or TRCP, and other sportsmen's groups.”²⁵

Among other sportsmen, Simpson's oil and gas industry ties are well known. A Montana sportsman and member of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers characterized her as a “former oil and gas cartel lobbyist, turned SCI Lobbyist.”²⁶ A popular sportsmen blog described her in 2012 as “a former soldier in the Bush Administration's resource and public-lands extraction machine” who “is now schlepping for Safari Club International, a reputable, if misguided, organization.”²⁷

Along with Simpson, SCI's contract-lobbyists are well-connected Bush-era Republican strategists with energy expertise and clients. SCI, for example, paid the lobbying firm Ogilvy Government Relations \$200,000 to lobby on its behalf in 2009.²⁸ The Ogilvy lobbyists who worked for SCI included Wayne Berman, reported to be a “superlobbyist-cum-GOP bundler and former Bush White House social secretary,”²⁹ who was also lobbying for the American Petroleum Institute and Chevron at the time.³⁰ SCI also paid the lobbying firm Crossroads Strategies \$600,000 between 2009 and 2012 to lobby on its behalf.³¹ The Crossroads

Strategies lobbyists working for SCI include: Hunter Moorhead, a former George W. Bush administration official who, according to the firm’s website, was among the architects of President Bush’s “Twenty in Ten” policy, which called for opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for drilling; and G. Stewart Hall and John Green, both of whom previously worked for Ogilvy, where their clients also included the American Petroleum Institute and Chevron.³²

In addition to employing oil and gas industry lobbyists, SCI also benefits from direct financial contributions from members of the oil and gas industry. Although SCI does not disclose donors to its tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization, SCI’s political action committee, or PAC, lists at least 48 large contributions from the oil and gas industry between 2010 and 2012. Its donors include Tim Wigley—who is the head of the Western Energy Alliance, the trade group representing Western oil and gas producers—and representatives of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, Conoco Phillips, and Chesapeake Energy.⁴²

Safari Club International’s PAC not only relies on the oil and gas industry for contributions, it also supports the same candidates that the oil and gas industry supports. The top 20 SCI-PAC recipients in the 2010 and 2012 election cycles received more than \$1.5 million from the oil and gas industry in those two cycles.⁴³

Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife

SCI, NRA, and CSF are not the only sportsmen organizations with close connections to energy interests. Founded in 1994 by Don Peay, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, or SFW, boasts 13,000 members and seven state chapters.³³ Peay, one of former President George W. Bush’s top fundraisers, was called “the don of wildlife” by *The Salt Lake Tribune* for his power in Utah state politics.³⁴ “He wields more influence on wildlife management in this state than any other person, including the director [of the division] or the director of the [wildlife] board,” said one Utah observer in 2003.³⁵

In April 2010, Peay co-founded a 501(c)(4) organization, called Big Game Forever, which lobbies at the state and federal level on big-game issues. It has been the subject of controversy in Utah for receiving state-funded lobbying contracts.³⁶

SFW’s ties to energy interests include:

- Supporting a controversial Utah land exchange in 2004 to benefit Hunt Consolidated, a Dallas-based oil company, after having been, according to news reports, a “past beneficiary” of financial contributions from Hunt Consolidated.³⁷
- Receiving 25,000 shares of Energy Solutions stock, valued at \$123,000, in November 2010.³⁸
- Being the only sportsmen group to reserve booths every year at the Four Corners Oil and Gas Conference.³⁹
- Defying mainstream sportsmen groups by not opposing the Bush administration’s oil and gas policies on public lands.⁴⁰ In a 2004 interview, Peay said to *The Salt Lake Tribune*: “In my opinion the ‘no management’ policy under Clinton was a lot more detrimental to wildlife than Bush’s oil and gas mining.”⁴¹

The National Rifle Association

Business Insider once described the National Rifle Association as “the most powerful special interest in Washington.”⁴⁴ With 5 million members and annual revenues topping \$225 million per year, the NRA and its affiliated organizations are involved in every level of politics and policymaking that relates to guns and gun ownership.⁴⁵

The NRA describes itself as a “single-issue organization,” but its lobbying arm, the NRA’s Institute for Legislative Action, makes clear that, according to the group’s website: “It is involved in any issue that directly or indirectly affects firearms ownership and use. These involve such topics as hunting and access to hunting lands, wilderness and wildlife conservation.”⁴⁶

The NRA’s lobbying disclosure forms show the organization to be engaged in a range of land and wildlife management issues, from lobbying to allow the importation of polar bear trophies from sport hunts in Canada and Russia, to opposing the transfer of a New Mexico wildlife preserve to the National Park Service for management.⁴⁷

Media attention on the NRA since the tragic Newton, Connecticut, elementary school shootings in 2012 has uncovered the extensive financial investments that gun manufacturers make in the NRA to advance their policy objectives. But, although the oil and gas industry is also a major investor in the NRA, these contributions and the lobbying objectives they help attain have not yet been thoroughly analyzed or understood.⁴⁸

Overall, the NRA manages an active and lucrative corporate giving program, yielding between \$19.8 million and \$52.6 million since 2005.⁴⁹ Wayne LaPierre, the NRA’s executive vice president, promises potential corporate donors that the NRA’s program will gear itself to “your company’s corporate interests.”

Although the NRA does not disclose the details of its corporate contributions, a review of its promotional materials at a 2012 conference reveals that at least six companies with interests in oil and gas contributed between \$1,325,000 and \$5,646,998 to the NRA, representing as much as 28 percent of the NRA’s corporate support. These six companies are Clayton Williams Energy, J.L. Davis Gas Consulting, Kamps Propane, Barrett Brothers Oil and Gas, Saulsbury Energy Services, and KS Industries.⁵⁰

The contributions of Clayton Williams Energy Inc. are so large that it has earned a place among the NRA's top five donors. Clayton W. Williams Jr. and his family own the majority of the company, which reported \$215 million in cash flow in 2013.⁵¹ Williams reportedly gave \$1 million to the NRA's Freedom Action Foundation in 2010, and he told an NRA gathering that he planned to do so again in 2012.⁵² Williams was the Republican candidate for governor of Texas in 1990 but lost after a series of missteps, including "an off-the-cuff remark suggesting that some victims of rape should 'relax and enjoy it,'" according to reporting at the time.⁵³ The company's largest oil and gas reserves are in the Permian Basin in West Texas and Southeastern New Mexico.⁵⁴

The NRA's advertising firm, Ackerman McQueen, which according to news accounts "has played a vital role in burnishing the image of the gun rights group since the early 1980s," also represents a number of energy clients.⁵⁵ The firm produces television ads touting Devon Energy's unconventional oil technologies; billboards advertising Chesapeake Energy as "America's Natural Gas Champion;" and long-form videos putting a positive spin on WPX Energy's operations in North Dakota's Bakken formation.⁵⁶ The NRA also hired Crossroad Strategies and Ogilvy Government Relations to lobby on behalf of the NRA between 2009 and 2012—the same firms that SCI hired and that employ lobbyists who are Bush-era political appointees with experience in energy policy.⁵⁷

Even former NRA President David Keene, who stepped down as the group's leader in 2013, boasted a background in lobbying and advocacy on behalf of energy interests.⁵⁸ When he was head of the American Conservative Union, Keene—together with Enron lobbyist Ed Gillespie—helped launch a new campaign effort called the 21st Century Energy Project. According to the initiative's press release, the project was to be "an all-out lobbying effort to encourage—and subsequently garner—public support for a thoughtful and honest debate of feasible solutions to our national energy concerns."⁵⁹ The campaign, which was also funded by Enron, said it intended "to respond to unfounded allegations by numerous ultraliberal fringe groups," and "educate the public on the impact various energy policies will have on Americans' quality of life."⁶⁰

Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Founded in 1989, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation was established to provide policy advice, host events, and supply "direct support" for the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, or CSC, which is a coalition of 281 members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives who have pledged to advance the priorities of sportsmen and women.⁶¹

Describing itself as the "Voice of the American Sportsman," the foundation "educates public officials" on the need to protect wildlife habitat, invest in conservation programs, and expand access for hunters and anglers.⁶² A 2013 investigation by *The New York Times*, however, found that:

*While ostensibly focused on those outdoor pursuits, (CSF) also presses issues important mainly to the gun industry, which is one of its largest contributors. The foundation opposes restrictions on high-capacity ammunition magazines, a ban on military-style AR-15 rifles and the imprinting of bullets with traceable serial numbers to help solve crimes.*⁶³

The firearms industry is among CSF's largest financial supporters, with manufacturers and dealers such as Remington, ATK, Walmart, and Winchester earning recognition as top-tier contributors.⁶⁴

The oil and gas industry's support for CSF, although similar in scale to that of the gun manufacturers, has been largely unreported. Shell Oil, however, earned CSF's platinum status—awarded for donations of at least \$100,000—and ExxonMobil and America's Natural Gas Alliance, or ANGA, earned titanium status for donations of at least \$50,000. Koch Companies Public Sector LLC—which is the lobbying firm for Koch Industries and owned by the billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch—is also a donor and listed as a CSF silver partner.⁶⁵ These companies are among the 22 oil, gas, and energy-related firms that CSF lists on its website as "financial partners."⁶⁶ Additionally, the American Petroleum Institute, or API, the trade association for the oil industry, has contributed at least \$47,500 to CSF since 2009.⁶⁷

What do corporations gain from their contributions to CSF? According to CSF, it is simple: "No organization has access to so many elected officials," the organization says on the front page of its website.⁶⁸ At receptions, wine-tastings, cigar and whiskey samplings, and outings to the shooting range, CSF provides donors the opportunity for direct engagement with members of Congress and high-

level congressional staff.⁶⁹ In Washington, D.C., where access to decision makers is gold, the value of CSF to corporate donors is clear: “Our promise to you is to keep delivering big returns on your investment,” CSF wrote to its donors.⁷⁰

In addition to its financial support for CSF, executives for Shell Oil, ExxonMobil, and ANGA sit on CSF’s board of directors. CSF’s board also includes John Green, the head of Crossroads Strategies LLC whose lobbying clients have included SCI, the NRA, the American Petroleum Institute, and Chevron.⁷¹ Until at least June 2013, the board also included Kevin O’Donovan, a lobbyist for the American Natural Gas Association.⁷² O’Donovan was previously head of state government affairs for Shell Oil.⁷³ Before that, O’Donovan was the domestic policy director for former Vice President Dick Cheney, during which he advised the vice president on climate change and energy policy, according to *The Guardian*.⁷⁴

CSF shares a particularly close relationship with SCI. Jeff Crane, the president of CSF, sits on leadership committees of both the SCI and the NRA.⁷⁵ CSF returns the favor by including both Melissa Simpson, director of government affairs at Safari Club International, and Ben F. Carter, executive director of the Dallas Safari Club, on its board of directors.⁷⁶ According to the SCI website, the payoff from the organization’s privileged relationship with CSF can be counted in the most valued currency in Washington, D.C.: access to power:

*SCI-DC’s continued collaboration with the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation allows for unparalleled access to members of Congress, state legislators and governors who are committed to promoting and protecting the rights of hunters, trappers, and anglers.*⁷⁷

Impact of influence: How the oil and gas industry's investments are paying off

The oil and gas industry's investments in SCI, NRA, CSF, and other conservative sportsmen's organizations have further expanded the industry's influence over federal policy, law, and executive-branch decision making. Although it is difficult to fully account for the scope and scale of this power and its effects, we have identified three areas in which the oil and gas industry's influence on key sportsmen's groups is reshaping public debate and policy. These areas are:

- Endangered and threatened wildlife in oil- and gas-producing regions: The case of the greater sage grouse and the lesser prairie chicken
- The backcountry: How the oil and gas industry and its allies are working to undo protections of roadless areas and wilderness study areas
- Public access and ownership: The movement to privatize public lands and wildlife

In each of these areas, the positions that are being advanced by oil- and gas-funded sportsmen groups appear to be out of step with the basic principles for wildlife and natural resource management that American sportsmen have been advocating for more than a century. Instead, these groups' efforts align with the oil and gas industry's long-standing campaigns to expand drilling activities in national forests and public lands; sell off federal public lands with high-mineral value to private interests; block efforts to protect public lands for their backcountry or wilderness characteristics; and fight the nation's most effective wildlife recovery law, the Endangered Species Act.

“If a caribou needs to be sacrificed for the sake of energy independence, I say, ‘Mr. Caribou, maybe you need to take one for the team.’”

— Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin (R)

January 29, 2011

Safari Club International Convention in Reno, Nevada⁷⁸

In 2014 and again in 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or FWS, will make two of the consequential and closely watched endangered species decisions in the past decade—decisions that the oil and gas industry argues will have far-reaching implications for energy production on the more than 200 million acres of land where they are found.⁷⁹

The first decision, which was just announced on March 27, 2014, was to list the lesser prairie chicken, or LPC, as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.⁸⁰ The bird—which was once abundant across the short- and mid-grass prairies of Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas—has lost an estimated 84 percent of its historical habitat, as grasslands have been destroyed or fragmented by development, including agriculture and energy activities.⁸¹ In 2013, severe drought caused the population of the lesser prairie chicken to fall by an additional estimated 50 percent, to 17,000 birds in the 40 million acres it inhabits.⁸² “The lesser prairie chicken is in dire straits,” said FWS Director Dan Ashe, when announcing the agency’s decision to protect the bird as a threatened species.⁸³

The second species, the greater sage grouse, is found over a range of 186 million acres of sagebrush plains across 11 Western states: Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, Washington, California.⁸⁴ Biologists estimate that, prior to the 19th century, the population of the greater sage grouse was between 1.6 million and 16 million birds. The population, however, has collapsed over the past century; in 2000, the Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that between 100,000 and 500,000 birds remained.⁸⁵ Scientists attribute the decline of the greater sage grouse to widespread hunting in the early

part of the 20th century and, in recent decades, to habitat loss and degradation resulting from a range of factors, including wildfire, invasive species, energy development, and grazing. FWS has pledged to decide in 2015 whether it will propose listing the greater sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.⁸⁶

The oil and gas industry's campaign against protecting the two species with the ESA is in full swing, from Washington, D.C., to the field.

Since the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed listing the lesser prairie chicken in December 2010, the agency received more than two dozen comments from oil and gas companies or their trade groups opposing the listing.⁸⁷

ConocoPhillips, for example, submitted three sets of comments, arguing that the voluntary measures that oil and gas companies are taking to protect the species are sufficient and “preclude the need to list the LPC.” ConocoPhillips expressed concern that if the lesser prairie chicken is protected as a threatened species, federal agencies might require the company to take additional cautions to avoid the bird or not drill in certain parts of its habitat.⁸⁸

Joining BP, API, ConocoPhillips, and the Texas Oil and Gas Association in opposition was a single sportsmen group, Safari Club International.⁸⁹ In February 2013, Melissa Simpson wrote to the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service arguing that a legal description in the rule was inaccurate, thereby impairing the ability of the public to accurately comment.⁹⁰ The Fish and Wildlife Service pledged to correct the error at the next opportunity but denied Simpson's request to republish the proposed rule.⁹¹

On June 20, 2013, the same day that Devon Energy and ConocoPhillips submitted their second of three comments each, SCI also filed a formal comment opposing the listing, claiming that “the harm associated with a threatened listing to conservation incentives greatly outweighs any perceived benefit from the listing.”⁹² In its submission, SCI claims an interest in the potential listing because it could limit hunting of the bird in Kansas, the only state in which hunting the lesser prairie chicken is allowed. Yet SCI also acknowledged that it expected that the Fish and Wildlife Service's listing proposal “would include provisions that allow the take of LPC under state-regulated harvests of the species or incidental to the hunting of other species.” SCI submitted comments a second time in January 2014, when the comment period was re-opened.⁹³

The oil and gas industry's campaign against protecting the two species with the ESA is in full swing, from Washington, D.C., to the field.

Why is an organization that features lions, bears, gazelles, and rhinos on its website and literature spending resources fighting the protection of the lesser prairie chicken when, by its own admission, the listing's effects on hunting activities would be marginal? The lesser prairie chicken is not among the dozens of species for which SCI provides awards in its Grand Slam competitions. No other sportsmen groups filed formal comments opposing the listing.⁹⁴

The organization's ties to the oil and gas industry better explain SCI's interest in the lesser prairie chicken. In addition to Simpson's background with oil and gas and SCI's own employment of oil and gas industry lobbyists, SCI's board and political action committee contributors have financial interests in energy operations in the area where the lesser prairie chicken is found. Ralph Cunningham, for example, an SCI board member and one of the largest contributors to the organization's political action committee, owns an oil and gas pipeline company called Enterprise Products that operates in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—the same states where the lesser prairie chicken is proposed for Endangered Species Act protection.⁹⁵ Among those who have contributed to SCI's PAC are representatives from Oklahoma-based Chesapeake Energy, the Denver-based Western Energy Alliance, Kansas-based Brito Oil Company, Superior Energy—with a presence in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—and ConocoPhillips.⁹⁶

Although SCI lost its fight against the Endangered Species Act listing of the lesser prairie chicken, the organization is also battling—hand-in-hand with the oil and gas industry—against the potential listing of the greater sage grouse. As early as 2008, the Safari Club opposed the Fish and Wildlife Service's finding that the sage grouse merits protection under the Endangered Species Act.⁹⁷ Joining SCI in opposition to the agency's finding, are the American Petroleum Institute, the Independent Petroleum Association of the Mountain States—now known as the Western Energy Alliance—Anadarko, the National Mining Association, BP America, EnCana Oil and Gas, ConocoPhillips, and Devon Energy.⁹⁸

Since hiring Simpson in 2011 to serve as its chief lobbyist, SCI's partnership with the oil and gas industry to oppose sage grouse protections appears to have solidified further. Shortly after starting at SCI, Simpson published an op-ed on behalf of herself at SCI; the Public Lands Council, which represents livestock growers who graze on public lands; and the Western Energy Alliance, which represents Western oil and gas companies. The op-ed criticized federal efforts to establish conservation assurances for the greater sage grouse in advance of the

Fish and Wildlife Service’s listing decision in 2015. “We fear that BLM may end up piling on restrictions that actually undermine private conservation of habitat and unnecessarily restrict economic activities and job creation across the entire West,”⁹⁹ wrote Simpson and the co-authors of the op-ed.

While SCI argues that its interest in the greater sage grouse, similar to the lesser prairie chicken, stems from its’ members’ commitment to hunting the four-pound, ground-dwelling bird, its position appears to be at odds with other sportsmen organizations in the West.¹⁰⁰ For mainstream sportsmen groups, the disappearance of sagebrush habitat at the hands of oil and gas development is a problem for both the greater sage grouse and—perhaps more importantly from the perspective of big-game hunting—mule deer and pronghorn antelope. According to a Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, of TRCP, report, a group representing Western sportsmen:

*Sagebrush ecosystems are critically important to numerous species of wildlife, including those pursued by sportsmen such as mule deer, pronghorn, and the greater sage grouse. The extent and quality of sagebrush ecosystems are declining across the western U.S. Wildfire, invasive species such as cheat grass, and energy development all threaten sagebrush and species like the sage grouse. Because of these and other threats, sage grouse numbers have declined dramatically in recent decades.*¹⁰¹

A body of scientific analysis confirms that, in fact, oil and gas development has clear long-term impacts on game and its habitat. Noise, dust, and pollution from energy-development activities disrupt sensitive areas, roads carve up habitats, and open landscapes can become industrial zones. Take the Jonah gas field in Wyoming, for example, an area that was once described as “a national sacrifice zone” for the extent of industrial development.¹⁰² The mule deer populations in 2010 had fallen 60 percent from when major drilling operations began in 2001.¹⁰³ A separate study published in 2011 found that 82 percent of the highest quality habitat for pronghorn antelope had disappeared from the Jonah Field and the Pinedale Anticline in Western Wyoming.¹⁰⁴ A 2011 report from TRCP found that mule deer—a prized game species—“is struggling across the West” as a result of several long-term challenges. “Chief among those,” the report concludes, “is that posed by energy development.”¹⁰⁵

In its public comments on the sage grouse or the lesser prairie chicken, however, SCI does not raise concerns about the effects of energy development on the species' habitat. Based on a broader review of public statements and comments, it appears that neither SCI nor the NRA have identified energy development as a threat to big-game species. SCI and NRA representatives did not respond to multiple CAP requests to clarify their organizations' views on the effects of energy development on wildlife habitat or to provide documentation of public statements they have made on the issue.

While SCI and the NRA remain silent about the effects of energy development on habitat, a third conservative sportsmen group with ties to the energy industry—Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife—has gone so far as to publicly rebuke scientific studies suggesting that oil and gas activities harm game populations. According to *The Salt Lake Tribune*, SFW's founder, Don Peay, said he was “a little skeptical” of a study that was partially funded by an energy company that found that “mule deer and natural gas drilling don't mix.” Peay said:

*A lot of oil and gas development is going on in the Book Cliffs, and the deer herd there is doing very well. And they're thriving along the Kern River pipeline in Davis County. My observation is that animals sometimes make short-term terrain shifts. The deer always seem to come back to the drill pads once they've been re-seeded.*¹⁰⁶

A 2003 profile in *The Salt Lake Tribune* reports that Peay actually stopped hunting in “the deer-depressed Book Cliffs” in the 1990s.¹⁰⁷ Later asked about a study that showed declines to mule deer populations in areas of Wyoming with high levels of energy development, Peay observed: “there are a lot of biologists that are full of bull****. They make up a lot of convenient lies to support their own agenda.”¹⁰⁸

Threats to the backcountry

Over the past century, no group has contributed more to the protection of the nation's forests, backcountry, and wilderness than America's hunters and anglers.

It was President Theodore Roosevelt, an avid hunter of big game, who in 1887 joined leaders such as George Bird Grinnell, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Gifford Pinchot to form the Boone and Crockett Club, a group of sportsmen dedicated to stemming the destruction of America's natural resources and wildlife at the end of the 19th century.¹⁰⁹ Together, they worked to save Yellowstone from mining and railroad interests, advocated for the principles of fair chase, and embraced the principles of science-based management of natural resources.¹¹⁰

Roosevelt's wildlife conservation legacy is typically measured by the five national parks, 150 national forests, 51 federal bird reservations, and 18 national monuments he created as president.¹¹¹ Yet it was his Boone and Crockett Club that helped establish and defend the principles of wildlife conservation and management that—while revolutionary at the time—are now the guideposts for every wildlife management agency in the United States. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, as these principles are now known, holds that America's wildlife belongs to the public and is to be managed in public trust by wildlife agencies, that all Americans have the right to hunt and fish, and that science must be the basis for land management decisions.¹¹²

The threats to big game in the United States have evolved since the end of the 19th century. Poaching and the commercial trade of U.S. wildlife has been severely curtailed, thanks to laws such as the Lacey Act and strong enforcement by state and federal natural resource agencies. Yet the loss of habitat at the hands of development remains a primary threat to wildlife stocks in the United States. Every year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development as a result of urban and suburban growth, energy development, agricultural activities, and other uses.¹¹³

Today's science makes clear that both the quantity and—importantly—the quality of habitat matters to big game. Development that fragments the landscape—whether roads, drill pads, or pipelines—results in lower numbers of elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and other big-game species. Taken together, the available scientific evidence shows that amid growing development pressures, big game needs undivided, roadless expanses of backcountry to thrive.¹¹⁴

The role of SCI and NRA

With scientific management as a foundation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, most sportsmen and organizations representing their interests strongly advocate for the protection of wild, roadless, backcountry spaces. A survey of sportsmen who had recently hunted in national forests found that 83 percent wanted to keep existing roadless areas in national forests in their current state.¹¹⁵ A separate public opinion poll, conducted jointly by Republican and Democratic firms in 2012, found that “more than two out of every three sportsmen view loss of habitat for fish and wildlife as a serious threat to a quality outdoor experience.”¹¹⁶

Yet SCI and the NRA’s views about the backcountry stand apart from both the scientific consensus and mainstream opinions of sportsmen.

Soon after Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in the Tea Party wave of 2010, a coalition of corporate interests, including the American Petroleum Institute and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, moved quickly to overturn long-standing protections on tens of millions of undeveloped acres on national forests and public lands. The vehicle for this action was H.R. 1581, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act, introduced by the third most powerful Republican in the House—the newly appointed Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, California.¹¹⁷

The effects of H.R. 1581, if passed, would be sweeping. The bill would overturn the 2001 Roadless Rule, opening an estimated 36 million acres of roadless forest areas to new road construction and enabling new mining, logging, and drilling activities. The bill would also strip protections from more than 6 million acres of designated “wilderness study areas” that the Bureau of Land Management manages for their undeveloped, backcountry character.¹¹⁸

H.R. 1581 and the companion bill S.1087, introduced by Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY), met resounding opposition from mainstream sportsmen groups and outdoor businesses. In Colorado, eight sportsmen organizations blasted the bill for “throw(ing) away years of stakeholder involvement while opening up millions of acres of backcountry public lands to development.”¹¹⁹ A broader group of 270 sportsmen organizations and businesses released a report noting that, “the habitat the House wants open to development with H.R. 1581, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act, would jeopardize hundreds of small, wilderness-dependent businesses that depend on that protection.”¹²⁰

SCI and the NRA, however, joined API, Arch Coal, the National Mining Association, and the U.S. Chamber in an ambitious lobbying campaign to pass the bill in 2011 and 2012.¹²¹ The NRA's lobbying arm reported that H.R. 1581 is needed because "wilderness designation ... has been abused and overused by extremists who want to deny public access to millions and millions of acres of public lands."¹²² Melissa Simpson, testifying at a House hearing in July 2011, argued that backcountry and roadless areas should be opened to what she termed "multiple use" to enable better access for "disabled, elderly and youth hunters."¹²³ Of note, Simpson's prepared testimony did not address what effects expanded energy development, roads, and infrastructure in these areas might have on the big game the Safari Club highlights in its Grand Slam program.¹²⁴

In addition to Simpson's vocal support for H.R. 1581, SCI appears to have been working actively behind the scenes to advance the bill. SCI filed 22 disclosure forms listing H.R. 1581 and its Senate companion bill as targets of its lobbying efforts, more than any other group.¹²⁵ As part of this campaign, SCI employed Crossroads Strategies LLC to lobby for the bill, a firm whose leadership boasts deep connections and experience in energy policy on Capitol Hill and in the Bush administration.¹²⁶

The efforts of SCI and NRA to undo backcountry protections met withering criticism from other sportsmen. *Field and Stream* observed that SCI and NRA's support for H.R. 1581:

*... was surprising to many sportsmen, since SCI is an organization that celebrates trophy big game hunting, and for most hunters, the only, or at least the best, opportunity they will ever have to pursue a trophy-size elk or deer will be on remote, difficult to access, public lands. The NRA's support of motorized access to these last remote public lands was baffling as well, since such land management policy debates would seem to have nothing at all to do with our embattled Second Amendment rights.*¹²⁷

A group that initially joined SCI and NRA in support of H.R. 1581, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, or RMEF, retracted its support in August 2011 under pressure from its members. "The roadless-area impacts of H.R.1581 include too many unknown risks for us to remain supportive," said David Allen, RMEF president and CEO. Acknowledging that blowback from his membership led to the reversal, Allen acknowledged that "RMEF listens to its members and is guided by science."¹²⁸

“The principles thus formulated and applied may be summed up in the statement that the rights of the public to the natural resources outweigh private rights, and must be given its first consideration.”¹²⁹

— President Theodore Roosevelt
The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt (1913)

The first tenet of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is that “wildlife is held in the public trust.”¹³⁰ By this principle, private parties cannot own or buy wildlife, and government agencies are entrusted with ensuring, in the words of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, “that current and future generations always have wildlife and wild places to enjoy.”¹³¹

The idea that wildlife is a public good to be managed for the benefit of all is now so widely accepted among sportsmen that the prospect of the principle being undermined or eroded seems unimaginable. Likewise, public opinion research confirms that the support of sportsmen for managing natural resources in the public trust extends from wildlife to the public lands they inhabit; a 2013 survey of hunters and anglers, jointly conducted by Republican and Democratic research firms, found that nearly three-fourths of respondents opposed selling public lands to help reduce the budget deficit.¹³²

However, what appears to be a widely supported concept—that wildlife and public lands are to be managed as public goods—is coming under growing fire from a network of ultra-conservative elected officials and organizations with ties to the oil and gas industry, including conservative sportsmen organizations.

The argument for the privatization of public lands is rooted in the writings of conservative institutions and scholars over the past several decades. For example, a 1999 article from the Cato Institute titled “How and Why to Privatize Federal Lands” argues that the federal government has done “an exceedingly poor job” of managing public lands and that the “the failure of socialism is as evident in the realm of resource economics as it is in other areas of the economy.” The paper outlines “a blueprint for auctioning off all public lands over 20 to 40 years.”¹³³

Today, conservative elected officials at the state and federal level are advancing at least two strategies for privatizing publicly owned natural resources, both of which have received the formal endorsement of the national leadership of the Republican Party.

The first approach, advocated by Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT), is to pass federal legislation to authorize the sale of 3.3 million acres of public lands. According to Chaffetz, “While there are national treasures worthy of federal protection, there are lands that should be returned to private ownership.” His proposal was an element of the House Republican budget proposal, authored by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI), in both 2012 and 2013.¹³⁴ Chaffetz has received more than \$68,000 in campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry, along with financial support from SCI and NRA’s political action committees.¹³⁵

The second strategy—championed by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate front group, better known as ALEC, which is funded by the Koch brothers, ExxonMobil, and other oil and gas interests—envisioned states seizing public lands from the federal government.¹³⁶ Led by Republican Utah Rep. Ken Ivory and using model legislation drafted by ALEC, the Utah legislature passed the Transfer of Public Lands Act and Related Study bill and Utah Gov. Gary Herbert (R) signed it into law in March 2012. The law directs the federal government to transfer nearly 20 million acres of public lands to the state by December 31, 2014, or face a lawsuit.¹³⁷ In January, the Republican National Committee passed a resolution endorsing the land-seizure effort and called on the federal government to heed the demands of Utah and other states that may pass similar laws.¹³⁸

For sportsmen and sportswomen, the privatization of public lands would reduce access to hunting and fishing opportunities. A Center for Western Priorities review found that there are already more than 4 million acres of public lands “that are inaccessible to the public as a result of land ownership patterns, absent entry points, and a failure to remove barriers to entry.”¹³⁹ Selling off public lands would not only limit access to the lands that are removed from public ownership, it would also compromise access points to other areas of public lands.

For these reasons, most sportsmen groups have a clear record of opposing public land sell-offs and privatization schemes. In 2006, for example, a coalition of Colorado sportsmen groups, including the Colorado Mule Deer Association, the Colorado Wildlife Federation, and the Colorado Bowhunters Association, expressed their strong opposition to a proposal in the Bush administration’s fiscal

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year 2007 budget that would liquidate hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands. “Our federal lands are not for liquidation, at any price, for any reason,” the group wrote.¹⁴⁰ The Bush administration’s efforts to sell off public lands were ultimately unsuccessful, partly as a result of the public outcry the proposal provoked.

Although these privatization efforts seem antithetical to the interests of hunters and anglers, there are signs that some conservative sportsmen groups are embracing the philosophical arguments behind them—namely, that publicly owned resources should be commodified. Don Peay, the founder of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (see textbox above), has decried the principle of wildlife being a publicly owned resource. Peay, who was quoted in the *Anchorage Daily News*, said, “it’s time to revisit the widely accepted principle in the United States and Canada that game is a public resource.” The article went on to report that “Peay described that egalitarian doctrine, found in Alaska’s state constitution and laws throughout the West, as ‘socialism.’”¹⁴¹ Peay’s organization, the paper reported, has an apparent financial stake in the privatization of wildlife and noted that the SFW auctions off special hunting permits to raise money, bringing in approximately \$2.4 million in 2010.

For their part, SCI and NRA have also recently staked out positions supporting the private, for-profit wildlife permit business. Both organizations, for example, fought unsuccessfully against a ballot initiative in Montana, known as Montana I-161, that changed the state’s wildlife law to eliminate what were essentially privately owned wildlife permits.¹⁴² Proponents of I-161 argued that the private market in hunting permits was resulting in “the loss of hunting access and the privatization of our wildlife.”¹⁴³

Whether oil- and gas-funded sportsmen groups such as SCI and NRA will translate their support for a private market in wildlife to an endorsement of the privatization of public lands remains to be seen. A review of public comments made by the NRA and SCI did not find any stated opposition to land privatization or land seizure efforts. SCI and NRA representatives did not respond to multiple CAP requests for clarification of their organizations’ views on the issue.

Conclusion

The oil and gas industry's investments in sportsmen groups such as SCI, the NRA, and CSF are, by all appearances, reaping significant benefits for industry at the expense of wildlife and our public lands. Through SCI and the NRA, industry has gained powerful allies in opposing the conservation of at-risk wildlife in areas with oil and gas reserves, working to weaken protections for the backcountry and endorsing the commodification and privatization of public resources. CSF, for its part, enables oil and gas companies, their trade associations, and their lobbyists unmatched access to members of Congress to help advance these and other industry priorities.

With such promising returns—in the form of even greater access to decision makers and powerful allies speaking for their interests—we expect the oil and gas industry's investments in SCI, the NRA, CSF, and other conservative sportsmen groups to only grow in the coming years. As they do, SCI and the NRA are likely to stray even further from the principles of conservation that American sportsmen have championed for the past century. This ongoing shift has severe implications for U.S. natural resource and wildlife policy. We have identified three areas, in particular, to watch over the coming year to gauge the evolving role of oil and gas industry influence on SCI and NRA priorities, specifically:

1. How prominent and forceful of a role will SCI and NRA play in opposing science-based efforts to conserve and recover the greater sage grouse?
2. Will SCI and the NRA translate their failed efforts to lift roadless protections through H.R. 1581 into a broader and more visible campaign to block the passage of legislative and administrative efforts to protect new wilderness, monuments, and parks?
3. Will SCI and the NRA actively support efforts to privatize federal lands or transfer them to states?

For both SCI and the NRA, taking any of these steps would represent an even more radical shift away from the traditional mainstream values of American sportsmen. And given their political power and financial resources, the continuing anti-conservation advocacy of SCI and the NRA will have lasting consequences for the management of public lands and wildlife at the expense of the public interest and America's outdoor traditions.

About the author

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