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The Politics of Rocket Fuel Pollution

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Executive Summary

For decades, tobacco companies have ignored evidence and distorted science in order to mislead the public and decision-makers, despite clear evidence that tobacco smoking is hazardous to public health. Now companies facing government action over rocket fuel pollution are deploying similar tactics.

The main ingredient in solid rocket fuel— perchlorate—pollutes drinking water sources in more than 20 states. Tests also reveal perchlorate in grocery store food supplies and in breast milk from women across the country. A 2005 study by researchers at Texas Tech University suggests that breastfed babies ingest levels of perchlorate that exceed the 'safe dose' recently established by the National Academy of Science—putting children at risk for development damage. California state agencies have discovered perchlorate in more than 400 water sources since 1997, including the Colorado River and hundreds of municipal wells.

In 1992 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took the first steps toward requiring cleanup of perchlorate from drinking water. In response, a group of manufacturers and users of rocket fuel joined to form the Perchlorate Study Group (PSG), with the stated intention of helping EPA by providing scientific information.

However, documents from the internal files of participants in the PSG reveal that, much like the tobacco industry, these companies paid millions of dollars to fund misleading research and millions more to influence the scientific and public debate.

Environment California Research & Policy Center investigated the activities of the PSG, using recently uncovered sources of information—including files and testimony obtained in the course of litigation. For the first time, these documents provide an inside look at the money spent and strategies employed by the industry in the ongoing debate over how to address rocket fuel pollution.

The Perchlorate Study Group campaigns for weak regulation of rocket fuel spills.

Publicly, the PSG describes itself as unbiased, with a mission of working "cooperatively with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to increase scientific and medical understanding of perchlorate's risk to human health."

However, according to an internal Aerojet presentation, the PSG was founded to "provide EPA with a scientific based argument to justify a higher RfD and thus a more reasonable remediation standard." RfD is a scientific term meaning 'safe dose' and is the foundation of cleanup regulations. A "more reasonable remediation standard" would have the effect of limiting the manufacturers' financial liability for existing and future spills while also providing support for defense against lawsuits.

The Perchlorate Study Group hired a public relations firm, which then downplayed concerns about rocket fuel spills. This same firm once performed a similar service for tobacco giant Philip Morris.

The PSG supports an organization called the Council on Water Quality, including a prominent spokesperson (former California EPA director James Strock). The Council has consistently and publicly downplayed concerns about rocket fuel exposure. Deeper investigation reveals that:

- The Council on Water Quality is actually a project of the public relations firm APCO Worldwide;
- In 2004, the PSG paid APCO \$770,000 to run this effort (See "Perchlorate Study Group Budget, 2004" on page 4); and
- On behalf of Philip Morris, APCO has used similar front groups to challenge the use of science in policy-making and make it harder for citizens to sue corporations.

The Perchlorate Study Group funded scientific research that was then used to argue that rocket fuel exposure was not a big concern.

- New analysis by Environment California Research & Policy Center shows that the PSG or its members funded more than half of all studies directly addressing the health effects of perchlorate exposure that were published between 1996 and January 2005 when the National Academy of Sciences issued a report on perchlorate. Independent sources like the National Institutes of Health funded less than 10 percent of the research.
- In some cases, PSG research appears to have deliberately employed an

experimental approach that was inappropriate for the task.

- The Council on Water Quality concludes that perchlorate is not a health threat at low levels using only PSG-funded research. The Council Website omits concerns raised by independent scientists who believe that perchlorate in drinking water at even a few parts per billion, or ppb, could constitute a significant health threat.

The Perchlorate Study Group worked to influence the conclusions of a National Academy of Sciences panel charged with evaluating perchlorate for the U.S. government.

- The PSG paid a consultant to present PSG-funded research at meetings of the American Thyroid Association, where members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel were present and while the panel was active.
 - Dr. Steven Lamm, the director of a firm called Consultants in Epidemiology and Occupational Health, requested \$25,000 from the PSG to attend the American Thyroid Association annual meeting in 2004. He justified this request by noting that National Academy panelists would be in attendance. He wrote: "The session is chaired and hosted by a member of the NAS committee and this will probably be the last opportunity before the finalization of the NAS report for a PSG presentation to be observed by the many NAS panel members who are part of that panel."
 - While acting as a consultant for the PSG, Dr. Lamm became a member of the Public Health Committee at the American Thyroid Society. During his tenure, the Thyroid Society issued two formal statements favorable to industry.
 - An email exchange between members of the PSG indicates that industry-funded research was intended to influence the panel to deliver a weak recommendation.

Rocket Fuel Cleanup Standards Should Be Based on Independent Science

State and federal regulatory decisions affecting rocket fuel spills will directly dictate what the corporate members of the PSG will have to pay to clean up rocket fuel spills. As a result, the PSG has a clear motivation to corrupt the regulatory process.

Actors with a clear financial stake in decisions that could affect the health of millions of people across California and the U.S. should not be allowed to influence the regulatory process. Rocket fuel manufacturers should not play any role in crafting scientific standards meant to protect public health against the effects of their products.

California's public health goal (and other state and federal regulatory standards for perchlorate) should reflect the findings of independent science, not bought-and-paid-for science. We all have the right to clean water and food free of rocket fuel contamination.

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