




COVERING FOR
CORRUPTION
PART THREE:
SEN. CORY GARDNER

A SPECIAL REPORT FROM THE CONGRESSIONAL INTEGRITY PROJECT



Ensuring that public officials are working in the public interest is one of Congress's most important responsibilities. But year after year, some lawmakers get it backwards: They attempt to distract the public from real corruption while they use their positions to enrich themselves and those close to them.

Sen. Cory Gardner (R) of Colorado has a history of taking policy positions that benefit his wife's business interests as a consultant and advocate for fossil fuels—and by extension, his family's bottom line. This report, part three of our “Covering for Corruption” series, details how Sen. Gardner's official actions overlap with entities Jaime Gardner has worked for or represented.

For years, the Gardners have skirted ethics rules so that Jaime can profit off of fossil fuels while Cory boosts those same industries through official actions. While we do not know exactly how much the Gardners have profited from this arrangement, it reeks of the self-dealing that Washington insiders love but voters despise. And while his family profits, Cory Gardner uses his public platform to moralize against self-dealing.

Gardner should come clean to his constituents about his intermingled public and private interests by disclosing his wife's client lists and any overlap with industries that have business in front of the legislative bodies he's served in.

We can't force Gardner to act with integrity. But we can expose his record to stop him from misleading and manipulating voters.

A POLITICAL CAREER BROUGHT TO YOU BY BIG OIL AND GAS


Cory Gardner is known for public decisions that benefit the oil and gas industry, which have been major boosters of his political career.

Cory Gardner has held elected office since 2005, as a Colorado State Representative (2005–2010), member of Congress (2010–2014) and a U.S. Senator (2015–present). During his time in Congress, he has received [more than \\$1.7 million](#) in campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry. He has received [over \\$1 million from big oil PACs](#) alone, including giants such as BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, Sunoco, and Marathon.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Gardner's campaign and leadership PAC have received [\\$684,548](#) in the 2020 election cycle alone from the Oil & Gas industry—second most among all members of Congress, behind only Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX).

Gardner actually received more money from the oil and gas industry in the 2018 cycle, [\\$885,482](#), than in 2020.

Over the course of his career, extractive industries have seen a handsome return on their investment in Cory Gardner. In the Colorado House of Representatives, for instance, Gardner [sponsored a bill](#) to allow oil and gas operators to drill without consulting with the Department of Natural Resources or the Division of Wildlife. He also [sponsored an amendment](#) to mandate that wildlife concerns could not be used as the basis to deny a drilling permit.



After his election to the U.S. House of Representatives, Gardner [voted](#) to preserve lucrative tax breaks for the oil and gas industry, as well as [for a bill](#) directing the federal regulators to prioritize drilling on public lands and waters over outdoor recreation. He was also a [prominent booster](#) of the Keystone XL Pipeline, which he falsely claimed would create thousands of jobs in Colorado. At the same time, he [firmly opposed](#) fracking regulations that would have lowered his political patrons' profits.

In his current role as a member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee, Gardner has been big oil and gas' best friend in Congress.

Cory Gardner champions profit by extracting resources from public lands while taxpayers see little or no return. Gardner voted [in favor of the industry](#) when it came to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), which his allies in the Trump administration [recently approved](#). More recently, Gardner [voted against](#) a resolution to preserve an EPA rule holding fossil fuel companies responsible for their carbon emissions. And, he [consistently touts](#) his work for oil and gas companies as a senator, framing it as “expertise in natural resource and agricultural policy.”

Gardner has allowed this fleecing of taxpayers to continue unabated, part of the reason for his abysmal [11 percent lifetime score](#) from the League of Conservation Voters. As the executive director for Conservation Colorado [put it](#): “Senator Gardner’s record shows he has been more willing to do what special interests and lobbyists in Washington want than to listen to his constituents back home.”

It’s a sweetheart deal for Gardner and the industries that bought him, but a terrible deal for the public.

GARDNER SPEAKS OUT AGAINST SELF-DEALING BUT TAKES ACTIONS THAT EXCUSE IT

Gardner told voters that conflicts of interest and self-dealing should be investigated, but refused to use his substantial power as a Senator and the jurisdiction of his committee to do so.

During a town hall in 2017, Gardner [told constituents](#) that “When it comes to any kind of supposed conflict of interest, there needs to be an investigation.” However, he has declined to investigate obvious conflicts of interest under the purview of his spot on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee such as [rampant corruption](#) by former Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt that eventually led to his resignation. At the same time, Gardner has been eager to [highlight](#) potential ethics violations on the part of his political opponents.

According to [a recording](#) from a “tele-town hall” in 2017, a constituent asked Gardner about action he could take in response to President Trump’s self-dealing, such as spending taxpayer money to stay at Trump-branded properties. Gardner deflected and demurred, saying “when it comes to self-dealing or enrichment ... I think that is something that is important to maintain accountability and transparency.” Predictably, he took no subsequent action to hold the Trump administration accountable.

When Donald Trump nominated oil and gas lobbyist David Bernhardt as Secretary of the Interior, Gardner excused his obvious conflicts of interest.

In 2017 Gardner [said](#) he was “proud to confirm” Bernhardt, who brought so many conflicts of interest to the Department of the Interior that “[he ha\[d\] to carry a small card listing them all.](#)” Gardner’s wife, Jaime Gardner, worked with Bernhardt at the Bureau of Land Management, where she had an office “just around the corner.” And Cory Gardner accepted [\\$4,100](#) in personal campaign contributions from Bernhardt, along with almost [\\$60,000](#) from the lobbying firm Bernhardt worked at. Despite those obvious conflicts, Sen. Gardner did not recuse himself from Bernhardt’s confirmation vote.

After Bernhardt’s confirmation, the concerns of ethics experts and whistleblowers were quickly borne out. In 2019, [The Washington Post](#) reported that Bernhardt’s old lobbying firm “saw a surge in revenue from clients hoping to influence the agency after he left for its upper ranks in 2017.” Meanwhile, [The New York Times](#) revealed that Bernhardt “continued to lobby for a major client several months after he filed official papers saying that he had ended his lobbying activities.”

THE GARDNER FAMILY PROFITS FROM OFFICIAL ACTIONS AND HIDDEN CONFLICTS

While Cory Gardner speaks up publicly against self-dealing, his wife Jaime profits off of the same fossil fuel interests that he champions in the Senate.

Like her husband, Jamie Gardner has also made a career out of helping resource extraction companies generate profit from public land. She is a practiced navigator of the Washington revolving door, serving in the [Department of Interior at the Bureau of Land Management](#), as well as running the pro fossil fuel groups [Colorado Resource Alliance](#) and Consumer Energy Education Foundation (CEEF).

These groups are backed by large oil and gas giants including BP, ExxonMobil, Shell Oil, and Chevron. Disclosure rules allow these groups to conceal exactly how much they received from each company. However, we do know that these groups and others like them frequently use “[consumer advocacy](#)” as cover for advancing the interests of huge corporations that provide most of their funding.

Jaime Gardner officially stepped down from the CEEF during Cory Gardner’s 2014 U.S. Senate run. But as the [Colorado Independent](#) reported, she and her husband’s pro-industry policy positions became a [critical part](#) of Cory Gardner’s campaign message.

Jamie Gardner formed her energy consulting firm, High Plains Communications, shortly after her husband first took office in Colorado—and while she still worked for federal regulators.

On June 23, 2005, Cory Gardner was appointed a member of the Colorado House of Representatives. A little over one year later, on October 30, 2006, Gardner’s wife, Jamie Morgan Gardner, founded [High Plains Communications, LLC](#), a consulting firm still listed as active in Colorado.



Jamie Gardner's work at High Plains overlapped with her employment by the federal government for roughly two years, raising potential conflicts of interest. According to her [LinkedIn profile](#), Jaime Gardner served as the Executive Assistant to the Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Alaska Affairs in the U.S. Department of Interior from January 2002 to August 2003. From August 2003 to until October 2008, she worked in several capacities at the Bureau of Land Management.

According to [ethics experts](#), while some federal employees can hold outside employment, they are not permitted to hold positions that pose a conflict of interest. According to the [Congressional Research Service](#), this includes any job where a federal employee would have to recuse or disqualify themselves from “participating in governmental matters to such an extent as to ‘materially impair’ the employee’s ability to do his or her duty.” It is unclear whether Gardner cleared this standard, and until she releases her client list, we cannot know for sure.

Jaime Gardner ran a monitoring service that provided regulatory information to energy clients while Cory Gardner served in the U.S. House of Representatives.

After leaving the federal government, Jaime Gardner served as the executive director of the Colorado Resource Alliance (CRA), “[a membership-based regulatory monitoring service](#) serving counties, trade associations, individuals and companies interested in natural resource policy.” She held this position from October 2008 through December 2014, overlapping with Cory Gardner’s post on the Energy and Commerce Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2010–2014.

CRA does not disclose its membership or donors, making it impossible to learn whether Cory Gardner was using his position in Congress to benefit any of the businesses paying his wife’s salary. But the resource extraction businesses CRA marketed itself to would certainly have had interests in front of Rep. Gardner’s committee.

Jamie Gardner and High Plains Communications represented energy clients that Cory Gardner oversees in his current Senate capacity.

A review of the House and Senate Lobbying database indicated that neither Jamie Gardner nor her firm were registered to lobby the federal government. However, a review of High Plains’ cached website indicates that Jaime represented clients with substantial interests before her husband’s committee, the Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources. They include the [Wyoming Conservation Alliance](#), the [Consumer Energy Alliance](#), and the [Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association](#).

The Wyoming Conservation Alliance, which is closely associated with the Colorado Resource Alliance, was founded by Wyoming attorneys who [argue](#) that government regulations “undermine our republic and our entire structure of government.” Cory Gardner’s committee has jurisdiction over exactly these kinds of regulatory issues.

The Consumer Energy Alliance, meanwhile, has been [described](#) by the Energy and Policy Institute as “an advocacy group for some of the country’s largest fossil fuel corporations”—virtually all of which have a huge interest in Cory Gardner’s committee decisions.



Members include BP, Chevron, Shell Oil, and ExxonMobil. In 2016, the Alliance made a presentation titled, "[Winning the War on Pipelines](#)," about how to "win" legislative fights over the Dakota Access Pipeline and Keystone XL Pipeline, which Cory Gardner forcefully supported.

While Jamie Gardner ran an oil industry front group called the Consumer Energy Education Foundation, Cory Gardner failed to list the conflict on his personal financial disclosures.

According to her [LinkedIn profile](#), from September 2013 through March 2014 Jamie Gardner was the President and Executive Director of the Consumer Energy Education Foundation (CEEF). Cory Gardner did not disclose his wife's position as the President and Executive Director in his annual personal financial disclosures for either [2013](#) or [2014](#)—a possible violation of Senate ethics rules.

In 2014, the [Colorado Independent](#) described CEEF as "pro-industry." The [Sunlight Foundation](#) reported that the group has "close ties" with oil and gas industry lobbyists, specifically the [Consumer Energy Alliance](#)—"a front group that represents the interest of the oil industry." According to MapLight, a nonprofit tracking the flow of money in politics, CEA regularly spends [\\$200,000 a year](#) in federal lobbying—including when Cory Gardner served in the House of Representatives. CEA also listed [Chevron and ExxonMobil](#) among its members. Jaime's consulting firm also listed the [Consumer Energy Alliance](#) as a client on her website, and she has performed consulting work for them as far back as [2009](#).


David Holt, CEEF's principal officer, said that Jaime Gardner's 2013 hiring [had been vetted](#) by the House Ethics Committee. The Congressional Integrity Project could not find evidence to substantiate this claim, either with regard to CEEF or her other work on behalf of industries her husband oversees. Similarly, Gardner's office has not provided evidence that her hiring was cleared by the House Ethics Committee.

Cory Gardner championed policies promoted by his wife's client, the Consumer Energy Alliance, including permits for drilling in Alaska Outer Continental Shelf.

Cory Gardner, meanwhile, was no stranger to the Consumer Energy Alliance or the causes his wife was being paid to advocate for. In 2011, for instance, he championed what CEA called a "[game-changing](#)" issue: drilling in Alaska's Outer Continental Shelf. In 2011, Gardner sponsored HR 2021, the [Jobs and Permitting Act of 2011](#), a bill to streamline air permits for deep-water drilling which would "[make it easier for oil companies to drill off the coast of Alaska](#)."

That same year, the Consumer Energy Alliance praised Gardner's role in shepherding the legislation. CEA's David Holt released an effusive [statement](#) after the House passed Gardner's legislation:

*"The facts are clear: it's time for our elected officials in Washington to end the numerous regulatory hurdles that needlessly keep domestic energy supplies off limits and hamstring our ability to address America's looming debt crisis. **I applaud Congressman Gardner** and the House of Representatives for their continued leadership to responsibly and safely unlock our natural resources in the Outer Continental Shelf."*



In turn, Cory Gardner thanked the CEA in a [2011 press release](#) for joining his efforts to pressure the Obama administration to allow for drilling in Alaska's Outer Continental Shelf. "I'd like to thank the Consumer Energy Alliance and its coalition for joining my efforts to keep pressure on the Obama Administration to move these permits forward," he said.

Colorado voters still do not know who Jaime Gardner's clients are, or exactly how their business interests overlap with Cory Gardner's official duties.

In his latest personal financial statement, [filed on August 13, 2020](#), Cory Gardner lists income that Jaime received from High Plains Communications during the 2019 calendar year. His disclosure does not include a specific amount.

Given Cory Gardner's previous position on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and his current position on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Coloradans deserve to know how his family finances are intertwined with his public policy positions. Instead, the Gardners are concealing information about their potential conflicts.

Basic ethical questions remain unanswered: What energy clients does High Plains Communications represent? Has Cory Gardner ever had to recuse himself due to his wife's professional work? And what energy patrons behind Jaime Gardner's various ventures have had business in front of committees that her husband serves on?

If the Gardners truly care about transparency and accountability, they'll answer these questions before voters head to the polls in November.

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