Gas Industry Contributions to PA Politicians Down

KEVIN BEGOS,Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The gas drilling industry gave less money to Pennsylvania politicians in 2011, but it spent more on lobbyists.

Politicians received $560,800 from the industry in 2011, down from $1.6 million in 2010, Pennsylvania Common Cause said in a news release Thursday. But gas industry lobbying expendtitures rose from $4 million to $5 million during the same period.

Shell Oil Co. gave Gov. Tom Corbett $50,000 in February 2011 — just a few months before the company announced that it was considering building a huge new petrochemical plant in the region. Exxon Mobil Corp. also gave Corbett $10,000 in December.

The data also showed that at the beginning of 2011, Shell began spending about $92,000 each quarter on lobbyists.

In June, the Republican governor and GOP and Democratic lawmakers joined forces to give Shell the largest package of tax incentives in state history. Union leaders backed the plan, too. The incentives could be worth more than $1.7 billion over 25 years if Shell builds a new petrochemical plant north of Pittsburgh, but a final decision is more than a year away.

"The amount that Shell committed to lobbying efforts is relatively small," said Christopher Borick, a Muhlenberg College political science professor. But he added that recent polls done by the school show 54 percent of the public have concerns that Corbett is too close to the gas industry. Corbett has received more than $1.8 million from the industry over the last 12 years, according to Pennsylvania Common Cause, a non-partisan group based in Harrisburg.

"In the end he's been willing to make that deal, for what he thinks is probably in his interest and the state's interest," Borick said. "That connection is in some way too tight."

But the Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry group, is by far the biggest lobbying force. After spending about $400,000 in each quarter of 2011, the figure jumped to $927,000 in the first quarter of this year.

Travis Windle, a coalition spokesman, said the group doesn't make political contributions to candidates, adding that "millions of dollars are being spent by opposition groups to attack and distort the clear and undeniable benefits of American natural gas."

The Marcellus Shale is a gas-rich rock formation thousands of feet under large parts

of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and West Virginia. Over the past five years, advances in drilling technology made the gas accessible, leading to a boom in production, jobs, and profits.

The gas is pulled from the ground through a process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in which large volumes of water, plus sand and chemicals, are injected to break shale apart and free the gas. Environmentalists claim drilling could pollute drinking water aquifers. The industry and many government officials say the practice is safe when done properly, but there have also been cases where faulty wells caused pollution.

Common Cause said that between 2000 and 2012 the industry contributed $8 million to politicians, and an additional $15.7 million on lobbying between 2007 and 2012.

Large-scale gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale formation began in 2008.

Shell did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A spokesman for the governor's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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