Jindal Opposes Suit Against Oil Industry, Groups Question Campaign Donations

KEVIN McGILL, Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A group of environmental and public interest organizations said Wednesday that Gov. Bobby Jindal's staunch opposition to a lawsuit against scores of oil, gas and pipeline companies over coastal erosion is motivated by more than $1 million he has received over the years in contributions from the oil industry.

In this March 15, 2013 file photo Republican Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal speaks in National Harbor, Md. This is the season of cultivation for people who might run for president in 2016. It's a time to get to know donors, to get the public to know you on TV and social media, to visit big primary states, network with the activists and ideologues, produce a vanity book, polish a record, deflect personal baggage, take a stand, develop a world view and scout for advisers and political organizations that can power up a campaign team. **(AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File)**

"He is selling out our state so he can raise money for his political campaigns," Anne Rolfes, founding director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, said in a statement issued during a news conference called to show support for the lawsuit.

The lawsuit was filed last month by the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, which says oil and gas canal and pipeline work has contributed to the erosion of wetlands that serve as a protective buffer for New Orleans when hurricanes move ashore.

Jindal's office called the groups' allegations a tactic to draw attention to the lawsuit, which Jindal has repeatedly called a windfall for trial lawyers that undermines his own coastal protection efforts.

Wednesday's news conference fell on the one-year anniversary of the landfall of Hurricane Isaac, which flooded several coastal areas and was blamed for seven deaths, and the day before the eighth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, when levee failures led to catastrophic flooding that contributed to a death toll of more than

1,800.

Making the allegations were the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Global Green, the League of Women Voters, Levees.org, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, the Sierra Club and the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans.

Darryl Malek-Wiley, of the Sierra Club, said the groups analyzed contributions to Jindal's gubernatorial campaigns going back to 2003. Oil industry contributions total more than $1 million, he said. He also said the group did not look at contributions from individuals related to the oil companies, which would drive the figure higher.

He did not have a breakdown on how many of the contributions came from any of the 97 companies that are now defendants in the lawsuit, but noted that they include more than $20,000 in contributions from defendant Helis Oil and Gas Co.

Other prominent contributors among the defendants, according to campaign finance reports posted at the state Ethics Board website: Marathon Oil, $15,000; Chevron, with more than $6,000; ConocoPhillips with $5,000; ExxonMobil, $5,000; Koch Industries, $2,500.

"This lawsuit is nothing but a potential billion-dollar-plus windfall for a handful of trial lawyers," the governor's office said in an emailed statement Wednesday. "It boils down to trial lawyers who see dollar signs in their future and who are taking advantage of people who want to restore Louisiana's coast. We've proven that the protection of our coastal environment is a priority."

Jindal, his top coastal protection official and opponents of the suit have said the industry already is aiding in coastal restoration efforts, including providing rights of way on industry land or assisting in restoration projects. Lawsuit opponents also have questioned the SLFPAE's authority to file the lawsuit.

Backers of the lawsuit said the industry has done much for the state but hasn't been held sufficiently accountable for the damage done by dredging for canals and pipelines that have contributed greatly to the loss of wetlands that serve as a natural buffer against hurricane storm surge.

The SLFPAE board of commissioners filed the suit in Orleans Parish Civil District Court on July 24. It was later transferred to federal court.

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