



By Email

June 24, 2016

Ms. Karla Thieman
Chief of Staff
U.S. Dept. of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250-9410

Dear Ms. Thieman:

I'm the executive director of the watchdog blog Checks and Balances Project. We seek to hold government officials, lobbyists and corporate managers accountable to the public. I'm interested in learning more about the origins of [Secretary Vilsack's March 28th, 2016, letter to UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Action Amber Rudd](#), in which he promotes the use of wood pellets as a utility-scale fuel source.

The March 28th letter was first made public, it seems, by the US Industrial Pellet Association (USIPA) lobbying group. As of this writing, I'm unable to find it on USDA's or the U.S. Forest Service's website.

The letter struck us as curious for several reasons.

Government resources performing a private-sector promotional function.

As the Obama Administration knows perhaps better than anyone else, polluting industry lobbyists frequently criticize clean energy sources that the President has supported – particularly wind and solar – as government-dependent forms of energy that “should stand on their own two feet.”

This refrain, of course, ignores the vast, decades-old constellation of government underwriting through the tax code, pollution cleanup and cheap access to public property that the mature and long-profitable oil, coal and gas industries continue to enjoy. With the Secretary's letter, the tree-burning industry seems to benefit from USDA staff time to do the international commercial promotion work that the “free market” critics of clean energy would surely see as better performed by the private sector. I've taken the liberty of copying Rep. Mike Pompeo on this letter for this purpose.

Staff time spent.

We were hoping you could shed light on a few questions related to this topic:

- Could you detail who at USDA was involved with conceiving of and drafting this letter? And, how much of taxpayer-funded time did each person respectively spend on its production?

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- What consideration was given, if any, to having several lobbying organizations that push tree-burning for electricity (e.g., USIPA, Pellet Fuels Institute, National Alliance of Forest Owners) to perform this promotional function instead?
- Given that this letter bears the Secretary's signature, I trust that a balanced approach to the national interest was taken in the serious step of drafting and sending this letter. Please detail which public interest groups concerned about the practice of burning trees for electricity were consulted in the decision to draft this letter?

Influence of lobbyists for the tree-burning industry.

We also wanted to ask you a few questions on this topic:

- Was the letter's concept and text originated within USDA, or was it with an outside lobbying interest?
- Why was the USIPA's VP of Policy and Operations, Jessica Marcus, the first to know about and make public this work product?
- Which specific lobbyists for the tree burning industry were in contact with USDA? And, who at the USDA was lobbied to produce this promotional effort on behalf of U.S. taxpayers?

The Secretary is a busy cabinet officer, so I trust that as Chief of Staff, you will be in the best position to answer questions at this level of important detail.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of our questions.

Regards,



Scott Peterson
Executive Director
Checks and Balances Project

Cc: Thomas Tidwell, U.S. Forest Service Chief
Mary Wagner, U.S. Forest Service Associate Chief
Carlos Franco-Rodriguez, U.S. Forest Service Acting Deputy Chief
Mike Pompeo, U.S. Representative (KS-4)