

What's Upstream planned nearly \$200,000 blitz to regulate farmers

Plan assumed EPA financial support

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

What's Upstream organizers planned to spend nearly \$200,000 in federal funds during and after the 2016 legislative session on a "robust" campaign to regulate Washington farmers, according to Environmental Protection Agency records.

It's unclear how much money was actually spent. The media blitz was scheduled to last six months, but faltered after three. Congressional anger over EPA's financial support for the anti-agriculture campaign scuttled some elements of the project.

Federal and state watchdogs are probing whether What's Upstream organizers or the EPA engaged in illegal lobbying activity by either mispending public dollars or by failing to register as a political organization.

Previously released EPA records showed the recipient of the EPA grant, the Swinomish Indian tribe, purchased more than \$60,000 worth of advertising in early 2016 on billboards and radio ads to promote the What's Upstream website.

The newly available records reveal the billboards and radio ads were part of an overall media strategy plotted by the tribe-hired Seattle lobbying firm Strategies 360. Advertisements drew attention



Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

A What's Upstream billboard was part of a campaign to push legislation aimed at imposing 100-foot buffers between farmland and rivers in Washington state. Newly available records reveal that billboards and newspaper and radio ads were part of an overall media strategy plotted by Seattle lobbying firm Strategies 360.

to the site, which facilitated a letter-writing campaign to legislators.

The new records also show the tribe's environmental director, Larry Wasserman, kept EPA abreast of the campaign, forwarding to the agency the plan to spend \$198,300 on newspaper print ads, digital advertising, public radio spots and billboards.

The records were released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the pro-agriculture group Save Family Farming. More FOIA requests are pending.

Gerald Baron, the group's director, said Friday that the records indicate EPA was al-

lowing What's Upstream to gain momentum.

"Without the public exposure through the media and congressional attention, there was nothing the EPA would have done about it," he said.

EPA distanced itself from the project in April, telling upset lawmakers that the agency could not control how the tribe used the grant, but also pledging to cut off funding.

The EPA has not revealed how much it spent on the project, which included website development and voter polling. What's Upstream had a six-year, \$655,000 budget before congressional intervention.

According to a newly re-

leased email, EPA staff members drafted talking points about What's Upstream once the campaign attracted the attention of Congress. A rough draft stated, "... the tribe has returned all taxpayer funding that went toward this campaign."

An EPA spokesman referred a question about whether the tribe returned the money to the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. A commission spokesman said Monday he didn't have the information immediately available.

The fisheries commission passed along EPA funds to the Swinomish tribe. The tribe's Wasserman did not respond to

a request for comment.

In an email to Wasserman dated Jan. 15, 2016, Strategies 360 Vice President of Communications Jeff Reading outlined the upcoming media campaign.

"What's Upstream will launch a robust, coherent and concentrated public information campaign beginning in January," Reading wrote. "Advertising will be purchased through highly visible distribution channels, including print, digital, radio and billboard platforms."

The largest planned expenditure was \$85,000 for social media ads. The ads would exploit "demographic and consumer targeting to drive 75,000 new unique visits to the website," according to Reading's email.

Strategies 360 also planned to spend \$47,500 on public radio underwriting, \$40,000 on billboards and \$25,800 on newspaper ads.

The tribe's What's Upstream partners included the Western Environmental Law Center, Puget Soundkeeper Alliance and Center for Environmental Law and Policy. The groups told supporters in an email that the website was launched "just in time for the start of the 2016 legislative session."

The campaign generated 51 form letters to the 147-member Legislature. Lawmakers did not hold a hearing on legislation to mandate buffers between farms and waterways, as advocated by the letters.

EPA records show some

EPA staff members had qualms about What's Upstream, questioning the tone and accuracy of its claims.

EPA anticipated the website would be controversial.

According to another newly released email, an EPA staff member sent then-Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran a briefing Dec. 8, 2015, on What's Upstream. The briefing included information about the "take action" link on the group's website.

Records released earlier disclosed the existence of the briefing prepared specifically for McLerran, but had not previously indicated it was sent directly to him.

It's unclear whether McLerran read the briefing. In a declaration in December to the state Public Disclosure Commission, McLerran said he had "no personal knowledge" of the "take action" link until months later.

McLerran stepped down as regional administrator with the change in White House administrations. Efforts to reach him through the EPA and listed private phone numbers were unsuccessful.

The commission, responding to a complaint by Save Family Farming, is looking into whether McLerran, Wasserman or Strategies 360 engaged in unreported grassroots lobbying.

Responding to federal lawmakers, the EPA Office of Inspector General is auditing how the tribe and fisheries commission handled the EPA grant.

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FFA DINNER TO FEATURE 'DIRTY JOBS' STAR MIKE ROWE

*Tim Hearden/
Capital Press File*
A sea of blue jacketed FFA members packed the Selland Arena in Fresno for the annual state convention last April. The California FFA is holding a gala dinner on Feb. 22 to celebrate its dramatic growth in membership over the last 10 years.

*Tim Hearden/
Capital Press File*
FFA students wait their turn to show steers at the 2014 Shasta District Fair in Anderson, Calif. FFA offers a wide variety of experiences for high school members.

Courtesy of Mike Rowe
Television star Mike Rowe of "Dirty Jobs" will be the keynote speaker at the California FFA's Blue and Gold Gala on Feb. 22 in Galt. For more information, go to www.CalAgEd.org/BlueGoldGala.

GALT, Calif. — A gala dinner here on Feb. 22 will celebrate the 10-year anniversary of California's FFA headquarters as well as the growth in the organization's membership.

The Blue and Gold Gala will be held at the FFA Center, which opened in February 2007 and provides housing and training facilities for the state officer team as well as meeting and business offices.

The \$250-per-plate dinner, which is also a fundraiser for the organization, will feature keynote speaker Mike Rowe, a cable TV host and narrator known for his series "Dirty Jobs" and "Somebody's Got to Do It."

"The gala is really about celebrating the 10 years of growth that we've had in California FFA," said Katie Otto, the organization's development director. "And the other piece of that is, 'How do we sustain that?'"

The gala will also focus on students' achievements and highlight the role that sponsors and the agriculture industry play in ensuring the future of ag education, according to a news release.

The last decade has seen some important milestones, California FFA Foundation board member George Gomes explained in a recent article in the California Farm Bureau Federation's Ag Alert.

Among them:

- Increased membership, from 64,271 students in 2007 to more than 83,894 students today.
- Growth in leadership-development opportunities and activities, with 14,879 students attending leadership training conferences in 2016 compared to about 8,000 in 2006.
- More than 1,500 agricultural education courses recognized for University of California and California State University entry, compared to 781 in 2007.
- The debut of 17 new agricultural education programs and FFA chapters.

"I think the model is working," Otto said of ag education. "People value it in California."

Among other activities in California FFA this month, more than two dozen FFA students tested their knowledge of forestry and natural resources on Feb. 10 at the Sierra Cascade Logging Conference in Anderson.

The students took part in a competition centered on such timber industry-related skills as map reading, compass use, determining the volume of logs, identifying tree species and calculating acreage.

The FFA competition fit a larger theme of education prevalent during the conference and equipment exposition Feb. 9-11 at the Shasta District Fairgrounds.

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