

“Big Food” (Goliath) lobbies and “Good Food” (David) doesn’t? Don’t believe the propaganda

My husband is used to hearing snark about being a lobbyist. As the owner of a lobbying firm in Chicago, he takes most derogatory comments about his profession in stride. So imagine my surprise when he became outraged reading aloud a boilerplate description of Washington lobbyists in our daughter’s new high school textbook.

In reality, many lobbyists in Washington are ‘fixers’ who offer to influence government policies for a price. Their personal connections help to open doors to allow their paying clients to ‘just get a chance to talk’ with top officials.

There was more to get his Irish up:

Lobbyists do not emerge from the ether as 50-something-year-old influence peddlers with grey hair and pockets full of PAC money. Lobbying firms are pleased to have people who know the lawmaking process from the inside and who can easily schmooze.

Offended by the caricature, he threatened to write a letter to the teacher and publisher (this is usually my territory). My daughter and I just laughed, knowing how hopeless that effort would be. No sympathy for the lobbyists, to paraphrase the Rolling Stones.

But the characterization in her textbook does fit the stereotype most people hold about Washington lobbyists. Not only are lobbyists often blamed for the rot in our political process, so too are the corporations who hire those lobbyists. And the media is often eager to simplistically separate the good (those who don’t hire lobbyists) from the bad (those who do).

That was the central point of two recent articles that both operated from the same premise: Wealthy “Big Food” companies hire minions of lobbyists to do their dirty work while virtuous “Good Food” companies don’t or can’t afford to lobby. Within a few weeks of each other, [Politico](#) and [Civil Eats](#) posted articles lamenting the millions spent by traditional food/beverage companies and trade groups to influence public policy.

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“From GMO labeling to pesticides to the source of the meat you buy, a handful of companies are spending heavily to keep information off your food labels,” claimed Civil Eats.

According to the *Politico* article, “there is virtually no ‘good food’ industry lobbying strategy in place, as the vanguards of healthier eating have largely ignored Capitol Hill.”

Well, not quite.

How accurate is this David and Goliath narrative?

Just because organic or other so-called “good food” companies don’t independently pay Gucci shoe-clad hired guns from K Street to “schmooze” congressmen doesn’t mean they aren’t playing the Washington lobbying game as well as anyone else. Between social media, the Internet and heavily-funded front groups that have no donor disclosure requirements, lots of “lobbying” is being conducted by so-called good food merchants. I’ve identified tens of millions of dollars spent by organic interests to lobby legislators and government agencies, pass state GMO labeling initiatives and fund the political campaigns of sympathetic candidates and lawmakers. And that’s just what I’ve been able to find using our fractured disclosure system. Although the organic footprint is only about 4% of the marketplace, the industry is spending plenty of money to promote organic eating while getting a boost by demonizing conventional foods and trying to block biotech crops and products.

Presence on Capitol Hill

Two of the organic industry’s biggest activist support groups – Environmental Working Group and the Center for Food Safety – are based in Washington, DC. According to financial statements filed with the IRS, the two organizations raised more than \$42 million from undisclosed donors between 2009 and 2013 (the latest year for which reports are available). While they like to portray themselves as only public interest groups, they are – in essence – lobbying organizations. EWG and CFS work to sway consumer opinion and advance public policies favorable to a very pro-organic, anti-conventional farming agenda.

- **Environmental Working Group** is a leading voice against genetically engineered crops and in favor of strict, mandatory labeling laws. It touts “from households to Capitol Hill, EWG’s team has worked tirelessly to make sure someone is standing up for public health when government and industry won’t.” EWG raised \$28.5 million between 2009 and 2013. Corporate “partners” include Organic Valley, Stonyfield Farms, Earthbound Farms and Applegate – all vehement opponents of crop biotechnology. According to disclosure reports, EWG has spent \$1.4 million since 2013 to directly lobby U.S. House and Senate members on a number of issues including GMO labeling bills.

EWG is strongly tied to organic executives/interest groups. EWG’s full-time lobbyist — Scott Faber, the vice president of government affairs — “leads a team working to improve food and farm legislation, chemicals policy and a host of other issues important to EWG and its supporters.” But Faber also serves as the executive director of “Just Label It” out of EWG’s Washington office. Just Label It is under the purview of a 501c4 called [Organic Voices Action Fund](#), which is run by Stonyfield Chairman Gary Hirshberg.

OVAF raised \$1.3 million in [2013](#) to “educate, raise awareness and advocate for mandatory labeling of genetically modified and engineered foods.” Mr. Faber was paid \$186,437 from EWG in 2013 and another \$46,000 from OVAF that same year.

Just Label It is not a public information group as it portrays itself; it’s an anti-GMO lobbying arm of the

organic industry. (*Politico did post a follow-up the day after its original piece clarifying that “good food” does spend money to lobby for GMO labeling. It reported that Just Label It spent \$30,000 on lobbying this year.*)

EWG recently announced its *own* collaboration with Organic Voices Action Fund to “highlight the benefits of organic food and advance the fight for labeling food that contains genetically engineered ingredients.” According to EWG, [funders](#) include 20 organic companies such as Annie’s, Nature’s Path and Earthbound Farms. Specific donations are not disclosed but a spokeswoman for Stonyfield confirmed the company contributed \$100,000 to OVAF this year.

- **Center for Food Safety** raised \$14 million between 2009-2013 and reported spending \$5.3 million for its program critical of genetically engineered crops. “CFS continued its work challenging the USDA and other governmental agencies for not adequately reviewing the environmental and economic impact of GE crops and foods.” The group strongly opposes HR 1599—the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act— and provides a portal on its website where people can contact senators to stop the bill from advancing in the U.S. Senate.

CFS “filed a formal legal petition with the FDA demanding that the agency require the labeling of GE foods and has spearheaded a drive with the Just Label It coalition (they’re everywhere!) to direct two million comments to the FDA in support of our petition.” Lobbying disclosure reports show CFS has spent \$1.1 million since January 2013 to lobby on behalf of a number of biotech-related bills.

The group routinely uses the court system to get its way with the government by filing lawsuits against the EPA, FDA and other federal agencies. In fact, CFS filed a [suit](#) yesterday in DC district court against the USDA, accusing the agency of withholding genetically engineered crops records.

CFS has also formed a 501c4 – the [Center for Food Safety Action Fund](#) – to support “lobbying on a wide range of food and environmental issues.”

Lobbying for state labeling laws

The “good food” industry’s biggest battles aren’t necessarily fought in the nation’s capital but in state capitals across the country. Corporate backers of GMO labeling laws have financed efforts in several states to pass referenda and legislation that would ultimately boost organic food sales.

The “Yes on I-522 Committee” to approve a GMO labeling law in Washington in 2013 raised more than \$8 million, largely from organic companies, executives and interest groups including:

- \$740,000 from the Organic Consumers Fund (PAC of the Organic Consumers Association);
- \$455,000 from the Center for Food Safety Action Fund (the group’s PAC);
- \$200,000 from Nutiva;
- \$180,000 from Nature’s Path;
- \$100,000 from Stonyfield Farms and Chairman Gary Hirshberg;
- \$100,000 from Annie’s Inc.;
- \$ 87,500 from Amy’s Kitchen and another \$40,000 in in-kind contributions for staff services;

- Whole Foods CEO Walter Robb contributed \$20,000 to the committee and his company made another \$63,000 in in-kind contributions for staff services and billboards. Ben and Jerry's donated more than \$150,000 in in-kind services such as advertising, staff services and (of course) ice cream.

Supporters of California's Prop 37 to mandate labeling of GMO foods raised \$9.2 million in 2012. Top contributors included:

- \$660,000 from Nature's Path;
- \$605,000 from Organic Consumers Association;
- \$200,000 from Amy's Kitchen.

Campaign contributions by top organic executives

Of course retaining a top lobbyist is only one way to make friends and gain influence in Washington, DC. A more direct way, and one far more appreciated by elected officials, is donating to political campaigns. And on this score, several "good food" executives have been quite generous:

- **Gary Hirshberg:** The man with the deepest pockets is Stonyfield Chairman Gary Hirshberg, who was quoted in the Politico piece that "a lot of folks are still very uncomfortable with the fact that you have pay to play—you have to be a force." He should know. Since 2008, Hirshberg has made \$291,000 in campaign contributions to federal lawmakers, Democratic PACs and candidates. His wife, Margaret, has made \$128,700 in political donations since 2008. Hirshberg family total: \$419,700.

In 2012, Hirshberg was a "bundler" for President Obama's re-election campaign, raising at least \$200,000 for the president. The couple contributed \$10,000 to Iowa congressional candidate Christine Vilsack, wife of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, in 2012. The Hirshbergs gave nearly \$7,000 to Montana Senator Jon Tester, who held a Capitol Hill press conference earlier this month with Just Label It and celebrity Gwyneth Paltrow to call for the defeat of the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act. Hirshberg donated \$7,400 last year to New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, another pro-GMO labeling ally.

- **Walter Robb:** Not far behind is Whole Foods CEO Walter Robb. Since 2008, Robb has made \$164,000 in campaign contributions, mostly to Democratic candidates for the U.S. House and Senate. He also donated \$5,000 to Christie Vilsack (wife of the current Agricultural Secretary and unsuccessful 2012 Iowa Congressional candidate) and \$7,000 to Senator Booker. Last year, Robb contributed more than \$20,000 to ActBlue, a Democratic online PAC. Solicitations for Colorado's GMO labeling initiative referred contributors to ActBlue.

Ironically, for a company that brags about its commitment to transparency, disclosure doesn't apply to its political spending. Whole Foods received low marks last year in a report by the Center for Political Accountability that scored major U.S. companies on policies related to political disclosure, earning 10 out of a top possible score of 100. According to the report, Whole Foods doesn't report payments to trade associations, ballot measures or other tax-exempt organizations; in fact, the Politico piece reported, "Whole Foods did not respond to requests for comment" about its payments to the Organic Trade

Association of which it's a member.

- **Mark Krumpacker, Steve Ells, John Hartung and Monty Moran**—four Chipotle executives—contributed nearly \$21,000 to three U.S. Senate campaigns in 2014 after virtually no record of political donations in the past.
- **Irwin Simon and Ira Lamel**—two top executives from Hain Celestial—have made \$77,200 in campaign contributions since 2008. Although Mr. Lamel officially retired in 2013, he still listed Hain as an employer on political disclosure forms through 2014.
- **Andrew and Rachel Berliner**, Amy's Kitchen founders, have contributed \$37,950 to the campaign funds of Senate and Congressional candidates since 2010.
- **Organic Trade Association**, according to opensecrets.org, has spent \$1.2 million on lobbying since 2008. The group also made \$65,000 in campaign contributions since that time as well.

So while it's easy to buy into a false narrative about lobbying from either a high school textbook or the media, it's not accurate. Money is the mother's milk of politics, and a lot of that milk is organic and GMO-free.

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