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US Congress inquiry reveals fake letters from 'voters' opposed to climate bill

Bonner & Associates, lobbyists hired to campaign against climate change bill, admit letters sent by sacked employee

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Don't blame it on granny. A US congressional inquiry has found more than a dozen forged letters to members of Congress purportedly from voters opposed to a climate change bill -- including a number from old people's homes.

The House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming now says it has confirmed 13 fake letters to members of Congress apparently from old people's centres and Latino and African-American groups opposing climate change legislation.

The committee is still investigating 45 other letters sent by the lobbying firm Bonner & Associates, which was hired to campaign against the climate change bill. The fake letters unearthed so far were sent to three junior Democrats who represent conservative, coal-mining districts. At least nine bogus letters were sent to Tom Perriello of Virginia in the run-up to the vote in the house on climate change in late June purportedly from Latino organisations, a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, and a senior citizens' centre in Charlottesville.

Two other Democrats -- Kathy Dahlkemper of Ohio and Chris Carney of Pennsylvania - also received letters from old people's homes. "We are concerned about our electricity bills. Many of our seniors, as you know, are on low fixed incomes," said a letter to Democratic Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper that claimed to be from the Erie Centre

on Health and Ageing. "Please don't vote to force cost increases on seniors."

The committee released three different fake letters to Dahlkemper claiming to be from old people's homes. They used almost identical language.

Ed Markey, one of the authors of the bill, said the use of faked letters marked a new low. "We've seen fear-mongering with our nation's senior citizens with healthcare, and now we're seeing fraud-mongering with senior citizens on clean energy," the congressman said. "Lately, democratic debate has been deceptively debased by fake facts and harsh rhetoric. We must return to an honest discussion of the issues."

The prospect of Congress passing climate change legislation this year has led to a lobbying boom in Washington with industry groups -- as well as environmental organisations, on a more modest scale -- seeking to influence energy reform. More than 460 new organizations paid for lobbying on global warming in the run-up to the house vote on climate change in June, a report from the Center for Public Integrity said this month.

There are growing signs that the campaign against climate change legislation is finding traction, with Barack Obama slipping in approval ratings and focused on the struggle to preserve his healthcare reform plans.

This month, a group of 10 Democratic Senators from midwestern states wrote to Obama demanding protections for American workers in the legislation.

"Any climate change legislation must prevent the export of jobs and related greenhouse gas emissions to countries that fail to take actions to combat the threat of global warming comparable to those taken by the United States," they said.

This week saw the launch in the oil capital of Houston of a series of "energy citizen" rallies against climate change reform. More than 3,000 people attended the lunchtime rally -- many employees bussed in by Chevron and other oil companies.

Greenpeace, which obtained a memo last week from the American Petroleum Institute laying out a plan for the supposed grassroots uprising against climate change legislation, has called such rallies "astroturf" events.

The inquiry has yet to establish the full extent of involvement of major coal firms in the scandal. Bonner had been hired by a PR firm, the Hawthorn Group, to lobby against the bill by the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity.

The lobbying firm acknowledged sending out the fake letters before the House of Representatives voted on the bill. However, its founder, Jack Bonner, said all 13 forgeries were the work of one employee who has since been sacked.