

Law Firm Pressures Brown University to Erase Research on Anti-Wind Groups

The firm, which represents opponents of offshore wind, said it would complain to Brown's federal and private funding sources.



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By Lisa Friedman

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A law firm representing opponents of offshore wind farms is demanding that Brown University retract research that details links between the fossil fuel industry and anti-wind groups.

The firm, Marzulla Law L.L.C., which has close ties to the conservative legal movement, called the research “false and injurious” and said it would complain to Brown's public and private funders, including the Energy Department, the National Science Foundation and the Mellon Foundation.

A spokesman for the university, Brian E. Clark, did not comment directly on the law firm's demands but said the university intended to uphold its principles of academic freedom.

“Scholars shape their own research and course of instruction at Brown,” Mr. Clark said in a statement. “One principle that is core to research at Brown is the ability for scholars to discuss contested topics and themes and to have those topics openly debated.”

Roger J. Marzulla, a founding partner of the firm, did not respond to email and telephone requests for comment.



The demands come at a precarious time for the nation's universities, which have become targets of a pressure campaign conducted by the Trump administration. Last month, Brown struck a deal with the government to restore lost federal research funding and end investigations into alleged discrimination.

The Trump administration is trying to stop the country's nascent wind industry, a source of energy that President Trump has disparaged since he failed to stop an offshore wind farm from being built within view of one of his Scottish golf courses.

Marzulla Law L.L.C. is representing several groups that are fighting offshore wind, including Green Oceans, a nonprofit organization that is trying to overturn federal permits for Revolution Wind, a 65-turbine wind farm off the coast of Rhode Island.

That \$4 billion project is nearly built, but on Friday the Trump administration ordered construction to stop, citing unspecified concerns.

In an Aug. 11 letter to Brown's general counsel, Mr. Marzulla objected to research published by the Climate and Development Lab at Brown that found that Green Oceans had spread misinformation about climate change and operated as part of "a fossil-fuel-funded disinformation network."

Mark Herr, a spokesman for Green Oceans, said in a statement that Green Oceans was a local and nonpartisan group, adding, "We have no association with the fossil fuel industry nor any conservative political groups."

"These oft-repeated lies are designed to discredit the messenger while preventing the public from absorbing the substance of our valid and well-researched concerns," he said.

J. Timmons Roberts, who leads the Climate and Development Lab, said in an interview that his students had found that groups fighting offshore wind "have chosen to get in bed with some of the most anti-environment and anti-climate actors." He called the letter "strategic harassment to shut me up and waste my time and make me more cautious."

Lauren Kurtz, the executive director of the Climate Science Legal Defense Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides legal aid to climate scientists, called the letter academic harassment.

“It definitely struck me that they were dangling the possibility of getting the Trump administration involved,” Ms. Kurtz said. “It seems to me like they’re trying to bully Brown and their researchers.”

The Climate and Development Lab, founded in 2010, is a student and faculty research organization. Nearly three years ago, students began looking into groups fighting offshore wind off the coast of Rhode Island.

Their research does not accuse Green Ocean of accepting money from fossil fuel companies, but it highlights the similarities between arguments made by Green Ocean and those advanced by fossil fuel groups that spread climate misinformation.

A new publication issued by the Climate Development Lab on Friday maps connections between groups that oppose offshore wind and the law firms that represent them, and uses Marzulla Law as a case study. It describes the firm as having “a history of advancing anti-environmental lawsuits and significant ties with the fossil fuel industry.”

Mr. Marzulla and his wife, Nancie, who together founded the firm in 1997, both previously worked at Mountain States Legal Foundation, a conservative public interest law firm based in Colorado.

Mr. Marzulla took over as head of the foundation in 1981, and later the couple founded the Defenders of Property Rights, which defended private property owners from what they viewed as cumbersome environmental regulations. Defenders of Property Rights joined the Cooler Heads Coalition, a group of organizations that rejected the scientific finding that the burning of fossil fuels was driving climate change.

Lisa Friedman is a Times reporter who writes about how governments are addressing climate change and the effects of those policies on communities.