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GOP-linked firm gathers info on people suing the oil industry. It won't say why.

By Corbin Hiar | 10/23/2024 06:17 AM EDT

An opposition research group appears to be trying to undermine a lawsuit that accuses oil companies of causing a deadly heat wave in Oregon.



A record-setting heat dome killed 69 people in Oregon in 2021. Local officials have accused the fossil fuel industry of contributing to the disaster. Nathan Howard/Getty Images

A conservative research firm is collecting information that could be used to discredit officials involved in a multibillion-dollar climate lawsuit against fossil fuel companies.

Argus Insight has made at least 10 public records requests for documents related to a lawsuit filed last year by county leaders in Oregon that accuses Exxon Mobil, the American Petroleum Institute, McKinsey & Co. and hundreds of other defendants of being responsible for a [dayslong heat wave in 2021 that killed 69 people](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/06/23/oregon-county-that-lost-69-to-heat-dome-joins-climate-lawsuit-fray-00103272) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/06/23/oregon-county-that-lost-69-to-heat-dome-joins-climate-lawsuit-fray-00103272>). Multnomah County, home to Portland, is seeking more than \$51 billion to pay for damages from the tragedy and to prepare for future disasters.

Three corporate litigation experts say Argus — a company with no apparent connection to the suit — appears to be digging for dirt on people who are supporting the lawsuits in hopes of using it to undermine individuals involved with the court case. Two people targeted by the firm's document requests argue that Argus is trying to intimidate them by seeking their correspondence with lawyers, local officials and climate experts.

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It's unclear who hired Argus to work on the sweeping climate case. But one of the Virginia-based firm's three partners is also employed by the conservative public affairs firm CRC Advisors, whose clients have included the oil giant Chevron and groups funded by the fossil fuel industry. Argus' known clients are conservative political organizations, among them Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the Republican National Committee.

This story is based on public records requests Argus researchers filed with state and federal institutions in the United States and Britain, an Argus pitch deck obtained by POLITICO's E&E News and interviews with seven people familiar with the firm.

Argus appears to be using the same tactics that the tobacco industry deployed against its critics decades ago, according to an academic in the United Kingdom whose communications Argus has pursued.

The strategy is to "try to figure out who is helping to inform these cases and we discredit them in some way," said Benjamin Franta, an associate professor of climate litigation at the University of Oxford. "If someone loses on the facts, they try to shoot the messenger."

In one tobacco incident, the cigarette maker Brown & Williamson commissioned a 500-page dossier (<https://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/1996/05/wigand199605>) on Jeffrey Wigand, its researcher-turned-whistleblower, that claimed he had abused his estranged wife and had been hospitalized for anger management treatment. (Russell Crowe later portrayed Wigand in "The Insider," a 1999 movie based on the case.)

Besides Franta, Argus has sought communications of other climate experts, lawyers and elected leaders associated with the Oregon heat wave case. It has also requested email correspondence and financial records from top regulators and judges at the Environmental Protection Agency.

"This is a front group for somebody that is trying to get information they can't get in the court system," said Joe Rice, who represented two dozen states in the 1990s tobacco cases and is now a partner at the law firm Motley Rice.

The litigation discovery process, he noted, is limited, time-consuming and would reveal the names of the companies seeking the documents. In contrast, working with Argus to obtain the information would shield the identities of its clients.

"This group is obviously trying to find information that they know would be damaging to a plaintiff or damaging to an expert," said Rice, whose firm is not involved in any climate-related lawsuits.

Argus partner Zach Parkinson, who previously worked as the RNC's research director, defended his firm's use of public records laws.

"Activists and pundits who complain that transparency is toxic to their agenda should ponder what that says about their own deeply unpopular positions," he said in a statement.

Argus was founded in April 2023 (<https://cis.scc.virginia.gov/EntitySearch/BusinessInformation?businessId=11533772&source=FromEntityResult&isSeries%20=%20false>) by Parkinson, CRC Advisors Senior Vice President Adam Kennedy and former Axios reporter Lachlan Markay. The firm's name is a reference to a watchman in Greek mythology. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Argus-Greek-mythology>) who had a hundred eyes.

Argus has no website, and none of its leaders — Parkinson, Kennedy and Markay — have disclosed their roles at the company on LinkedIn or other social media sites.

Top Republicans are familiar with the firm despite its obscurity.

In its 18 months of existence, Argus has received a total of over \$1.2 million in payments from Trump's campaign, the RNC, the Republican Attorneys General Association, the office of House Speaker Mike Johnson and conservative congressional campaigns, federal financial disclosures show. Federal campaign records described its work as "research" or "consulting," while the speaker's office said it paid Argus for "publications" and reference material.

Argus has also been hired by "Fortune 100 companies" to "assist in ongoing high-level litigation" and "provide compelling narratives," according to the pitch deck (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25240279-spolitico-p24082813270>).

Argus' leaders did not dispute the authenticity of the document.

Elected officials and bureaucrats targeted

Five open records requests (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25175827-prr_001-prr_20-2) from an Argus researcher sought communications among Multnomah County officials, University of Oregon Law School staffers and lawyers at Worthington & Caron, one of the firms representing the county in the case. Three others demanded (<https://publicrecords.uoregon.edu/requests?keys=argus>) related information from Oregon Law staff. The university and county did not respond to requests for comment.

The Argus researcher, Nick Ballas, also asked for county emails that included references to Oxford's Franta, the [Rockefeller Family Fund](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/05/04/why-exxon-hates-the-rockefellers-its-founding-family-002322) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/05/04/why-exxon-hates-the-rockefellers-its-founding-family-002322>), and other people and groups that have publicly supported litigation against the fossil fuel industry, his requests show.

Roger Worthington, a lawyer for Multnomah County who was named in some of the inquiries, accused the oil companies of working with Argus "to chill collaboration and communication between donors and the universities."

"This is a blatant and shameless form of intimidation and harassment," he said in an email to E&E News.

Argus disputed that it was seeking to bully academics and regulators.

"Public officials who feel intimidated by citizens' right to information on their government should consider the private sector, where they are unburdened by accountability to the American taxpayer," Parkinson said.

More than 200 lawsuits worldwide have targeted the fossil fuel industry for allegedly downplaying the risks of extreme weather events, sea-level rise, catastrophic wildfires and other impacts of climate change, the main cause of which is the burning of oil, gas and coal. Environmental groups or individual activists filed most of the suits, [according to an analysis](https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Global-trends-in-climate-change-litigation-2024-snapshot.pdf) (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Global-trends-in-climate-change-litigation-2024-snapshot.pdf>) published in June by the London School of Economics.

U.S. climate lawsuits, first filed by several [California municipalities in 2017](https://climateintegrity.org/lawsuits/case/state-of-california) (<https://climateintegrity.org/lawsuits/case/state-of-california>), continue to face legal hurdles. The fossil fuel industry has sought to move the cases to federal courts, where they believe the suits are more likely to be dismissed under the Clean Air Act. Elected officials and environmental activists involved in those cases have also been [hit with litigation](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2022/10/06/minn-ag-wins-climate-skirmish-weeks-before-election-00060553) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2022/10/06/minn-ag-wins-climate-skirmish-weeks-before-election-00060553>) and [hacking campaigns](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/17/private-eye-who-hacked-exxons-foes-gets-prison-time-00127717) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2023/11/17/private-eye-who-hacked-exxons-foes-gets-prison-time-00127717>) seeking to obtain their communications.

"The damages that are at stake here are large enough to pose a considerable threat to the fossil fuel industry," said Franta, who noted that considerable evidence [already exists](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16092015/exxons-own-research-confirmed-fossil-fuels-role-in-global-warming/) (<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16092015/exxons-own-research-confirmed-fossil-fuels-role-in-global-warming/>) that [corporate](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2020/10/26/exclusive-gm-ford-knew-about-climate-change-50-years-ago-009346) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2020/10/26/exclusive-gm-ford-knew-about-climate-change-50-years-ago-009346>) [leaders understood](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/06/30/us-chamber-official-warned-of-climate-danger-in-1989-000165) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2021/06/30/us-chamber-official-warned-of-climate-danger-in-1989-000165>) the impact their products were having on the climate decades before the public did. "Think about these cases in aggregate: We're probably talking about trillions of dollars."

Argus declined to answer questions about who hired the firm to collect the information.

But CRC Advisors, which operates out of the same Arlington, Virginia, office building as Argus, has [previously worked for Chevron](https://www.eenews.net/articles/slip-up-reveals-chevron-ties-to-architect-of-climate-attack/) (<https://www.eenews.net/articles/slip-up-reveals-chevron-ties-to-architect-of-climate-attack/>) and fossil fuel-funded conservative groups such as Americans for Prosperity and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, according to [documents obtained by Rolling Stone](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/supreme-court-leonard-leo-crc-advisors-leak-1235011906/) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/supreme-court-leonard-leo-crc-advisors-leak-1235011906/>). The chair of CRC Advisors is conservative activist Leonard Leo.

Argus' Ballas has also scrutinized federal environmental officials who don't have clear links to the Oregon heat wave case.

Last year, he requested the personal financial records of two administrative law judges and their communications with outside legal and intergovernmental groups. The EPA judges, Mary Kay Lynch and Kathie Stein, served on a panel in 2021 that [imposed a nearly \\$648,000 fine on Chevron](https://yosemite.epa.gov/oa/EAB_Web_Docket.nsf/Slip%20Opinions%20and%20Published%20and%20Unpublished%20Decisions/05AB23B2978DAABC8525875600511CC2/$File/Chevron%20U.S.A.%20Final%20Order%20with%20Consent%20Agreement.pdf) ([https://yosemite.epa.gov/oa/EAB_Web_Docket.nsf/Slip%20Opinions%20and%20Published%20and%20Unpublished%20Decisions/05AB23B2978DAABC8525875600511CC2/\\$File/Chevron%20U.S.A.%20Final%20Order%20with%20Consent%20Agreement.pdf](https://yosemite.epa.gov/oa/EAB_Web_Docket.nsf/Slip%20Opinions%20and%20Published%20and%20Unpublished%20Decisions/05AB23B2978DAABC8525875600511CC2/$File/Chevron%20U.S.A.%20Final%20Order%20with%20Consent%20Agreement.pdf)) for a series of alleged air pollution violations from its refining operations. Lynch and Stein, who retired in January, didn't respond to requests for comment from E&E News.

Ballas also [asked EPA in July 2023 to turn over emails](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-07/fiscal-year-2023-epa-foia-log-.pdf) (<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-07/fiscal-year-2023-epa-foia-log-.pdf>) from the leaders of the agency's air and environmental justice offices that mentioned the phrase "climate emergency." President Joe Biden had publicly considered [declaring a national climate emergency](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2022/07/22/biden-climate-emergencys-most-potent-threat-the-supreme-court-00046993) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2022/07/22/biden-climate-emergencys-most-potent-threat-the-supreme-court-00046993>) the year before, when his environmental agenda had stalled in Congress.

"Chevron has no knowledge of — or involvement in — this activity," Theodore Boutrous Jr., a partner at the law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, said in a one-line statement provided by the oil company in response to questions about Argus' actions. Boutrous is representing the oil company in the Oregon litigation. Chevron did not specify which activity he was referring to.

Americans for Prosperity spokesperson Bill Riggs said the group "has never engaged Argus Insight to do any work on its behalf."

CRC Advisors and the Competitive Enterprise Institute didn't respond to requests for comment.

Founders worked for, and criticized, Trump

Argus is similar to many other opposition research firms in Washington that promise to find information on their clients' political or commercial rivals. The firms are frequently used by partisans of all stripes. During the 2016 election, for example, the oppo group Fusion GPS was hired by both the conservative news outlet Washington Free Beacon and the Democratic law firm Perkins Coie to [investigate Trump](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/01/russia-steele-dossier-democrats-republicans-216921/) (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/01/russia-steele-dossier-democrats-republicans-216921/>).

What sets the new research firm apart is its mix of “political and policy veterans” with media experience that “primes our work for maximum public impact,” Argus said in an undated pitch deck that E&E News obtained in August. The company said it had a staff of 22 full-time investigators and media analysts.



The only officials listed in the deck were the partners Parkinson, Kennedy and Markay, who has also reported at the Daily Beast and Washington Free Beacon. Parkinson and Kennedy both previously served in the Trump White House. In 2020, Markay [co-authored the book](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/610242/sinking-in-the-swamp-by-lachlan-markay-and-asawin-suebsaeng/) (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/610242/sinking-in-the-swamp-by-lachlan-markay-and-asawin-suebsaeng/>). “Sinking in the Swamp: How Trump’s Minions and Misfits Poisoned Washington.”

Other Argus officials have disclosed their ties to the firm in open records requests. Those include Allan Blutstein, who served as an attorney-adviser at the departments of Justice and Treasury during the Bush and Obama administrations. During the Trump era, he used the Freedom of Information Act to review the emails of EPA staffers suspected of [criticizing former Administrator Scott Pruitt](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/us/politics/epa-scott-pruitt-foia.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/us/politics/epa-scott-pruitt-foia.html>) or [donating to Democratic lawmakers](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/08/a-republican-firm-is-targeting-epa-staff-who-have-donated-to-democrats/) (<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/08/a-republican-firm-is-targeting-epa-staff-who-have-donated-to-democrats/>).

The deck touted “exploitable vulnerabilities” that Argus found for a wealthy client whose hostile takeover bid had been rejected by leaders of a private company.

“Presented to those executives, with the implied prospect of public exposure, our finding succeeded in bringing them to the negotiating table,” the presentation said.

Another accomplishment described in the deck involved unearthing “potential criminal and civil violations of tax, campaign finance and ethics laws” for a client described as a “nonprofit watchdog group.”

Argus provides “clients with unmatched visibility on political and policy risk, helping them counter adversarial campaigns and advance their communications and policy goals,” Parkinson’s statement said. “We are proud of the work our rapidly growing team has accomplished in a dynamic political environment, and we look forward to serving clients in Washington and across the country for years to come.”

Lesley Clark, Timothy Cama, Heidi Przybyla and Daniel Lippman contributed to this report.

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