



**Written Testimony of Lisa M. Maatz**

**Director Public Policy and Government Relations**

**American Association of University Women**

before the

**United States House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming**

Hearing on

**"Fraudulent Letters Opposing Clean Energy Legislation"**

**October 29, 2009**

Chairman Markey, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and members of the select committee. My name is Lisa Maatz, and I am the director of public policy and government relations for the American Association of University Women (AAUW). I'd like to thank you and your able staff for conducting this important investigation into fraudulent letters sent to House members during the debate over the Clean Energy and Security Act – also known as the "cap and trade" bill.

I am glad to be here today to address the troubling practice of "astroturfing." What is astroturfing, you may ask? It is simply this: politically-motivated public relations campaigns that seek to create the impression of spontaneous grassroots engagement, hence the reference to artificial grass; astroturfing refers to imitating or faking popular grassroots opinion or behavior. The goal of these campaigns is to disguise the efforts of a political group or corporation as an independent public reaction – in this case to a specific piece of legislation. These corporate-funded (read: well-funded) activities are designed to appear to the electorate as true, people-driven grassroots movements, when in fact such efforts are anything but.

I know, because I work at a genuine grassroots organization, with committed, community-based advocates. Founded in 1881, AAUW has approximately 100,000 dues-paying members and 1000 community-based branches nationwide. We have a proud 128-year history of breaking through educational and economic barriers for women and girls, and we continue our mission through education, advocacy and research.

As you know, AAUW recently has been affected by the worst form of astroturfing – one that attempted to play off our solid reputation. Bonner & Associates, a grassroots lobbying firm hired by the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), has used AAUW's good name

and those of other national organizations such as the NAACP and local organizations as well – in fraudulent letters to members of Congress. They did this under the auspices of the Hawthorn Group and ACCCE to further the coal industry’s lobbying against the “cap and trade” bill. Ironically, energy policy is not an area in which AAUW actively advocates. We are best known for playing a leading role in some of the nation's most important public policy success stories in the areas of pay equity, family-friendly workplaces and education.

In this act of forgery, an employee of Bonner & Associates resurrected a now-defunct Charlottesville AAUW branch, used the AAUW logo, and faxed and hand-delivered at least one letter to a Virginia congressman, asking Rep. Tom Periello to vote against the “cap and trade” bill. According to press accounts, Bonner, Hawthorn, and ACCCE knew of the fraudulent letters at least two days before the House voted on the cap and trade bill, but neglected to inform the House or the affected offices about the fraudulent letters until weeks later – well after what proved to be a very close vote.

When I contacted Bonner & Associates, I was told that a total of 58 letters were sent to several members of Congress by Bonner & Associates on behalf of ACCCE; as many as 13 of which were fraudulent. I was also told that the employee in question had been fired, and the matter referred to the U.S. Attorney in DC to pursue prosecution against the individual. This incident of forgery is an outright deception and represents a blatant lack of ethics. AAUW greatly resents having been portrayed in false light, and sympathizes with the other organizations that have been victims of this outrageous act.

In truth, the scapegoating of one employee is not going to get to the bottom of this astroturfing problem. AAUW, and many of the other groups affected by this scandal, wonders what – besides this committee’s efforts – is being done to hold both Bonner & Associates and ACCCE accountable. On August 2, 2009, the Sierra Club sent a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder asking for an investigation into the matter, especially with regards to any possible criminal wrongdoing such as wire fraud and identity theft. MoveOn.org also did an action towards this end. But to date, the Attorney General has not responded.

Not only does AAUW join the call for an investigation by the Department of Justice, but we also encourage Congress to look at legislation to address this shockingly legal and unreported practice of astroturfing. In 2007, there were attempts made to include grassroots lobbying disclosures in the ethics bill, which would have required grassroots firms such as Bonner & Associates to disclose their lobbying expenditures and the identity of their clients. Unfortunately, that section was removed by Sen. Robert F. Bennett from Utah. AAUW urges Congress to revisit this issue in light of these revelations.

Our members are a proud, conscientious, outspoken lot – as probably can be attested to by more than one member of this committee. It is very clear to all of us in the AAUW community that we have been subjected to a clear act of fraud. I think a quote by one of our members, taken from the AAUW blog, summarizes the membership’s outrage:

*“Thanks Lisa, and [AAUW CEO] Linda Hallman, for being on top of this with a quick and measured response. One of our greatest strengths as an organization is the reality that we’ve always worked from facts. In this era of angry talk show hosts and shoddy reporting, a voice of reason is needed more than ever. I’d love to credit this quote, but I can’t remember where I read it: ‘Belligerence is the currency of the intellectually bankrupt.’” Jackie Littleton, Texas*

Perhaps the most poignant response came from AAUW member Willa Lawall of Virginia. She wrote:

*“As a former President of the Charlottesville AAUW Branch, I was shocked to learn from Gwen Dent, our last President, that the cited letter used her home address without her permission and cited the name of our dear lamented longtime historian, Anne Waldner, who died before the ‘cap and trade’ issue ever came up. So, not only were Bonner and Associates engaging brazenly in theft of the AAUW logo, their theft of address and identity was grossly insulting.”*

AAUW members also took it upon themselves to write open letters to Congress on our blog when they were informed about this scandal. Here is a selection of those missives:

*“I am truly outraged at the lack of ethics and common sense that lobbying groups and political activists will use to get attention. As the technology becomes more sophisticated it is harder for individuals and organizations to protect themselves and their good names for common thieves masquerading as do-gooders. There is no easy answer to thwarting these technotheives, but a measure of caution must be exercised by legislators who receive mailings from institutions / groups / non-profits that would not normally reach out [on an issue]. The burden that extremists place on the legitimate change process is staggering and the mockery made of legitimate organizations cannot be tolerated. Prosecuting known offenders, regardless of their cries of innocence, is essential.” – Bettine Avenia*

*The fraud by special interest groups using the AAUW logo is abhorrent to all members of our organization and well as to people of good will everywhere. It is to be hoped that you will continue to probe this outrageous act and to urge prosecution of the suspected individuals who were parties to such an act. Thank you.”— Darlene T. Griggs*

In a litany of disturbing developments, one of the most problematic elements was that Bonner & Associates never reached out to AAUW directly. We confirmed with our Virginia state affiliate that they had been contacted by ACCCE; however, since there is no longer a Charlottesville Branch, our members were quite frankly confused as to the situation and what was actually happening. At this point, when it was clear to both ACCCE and to Bonner & Associates that there was no AAUW branch and that they were dealing with volunteer grassroots advocates rather than paid staff, they should have immediately called AAUW’s national headquarters. Unfortunately, neither ACCCE nor Bonner made such a call.

Instead, AAUW found out about our involvement in this disturbing situation in a way no one wants to hear such news – the newspaper. As a result, a lot of what we know about this incident has come from media reports and talking to the other groups involved.

Because of our dedicated and active membership, AAUW is well-respected on Capitol Hill. Perhaps this is why corporate lobbyists used our good name to try to unfairly sway the outcome of the “cap and trade” vote. AAUW has a small team of ethical, professional lobbyists to fight for our issues on Capitol Hill and in the administration. AAUW claims legislative victories like the “Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act,” the New G.I. Bill, and the just-signed expansion of hate crimes law because we use facts and are driven by our honest devotion to the public good. We organize our dedicated membership, and it is their voices that ensure that AAUW can continue to advocate for laws that are fair to women.

AAUW approaches our challenges as good clean fights. We believe that cynical and premeditated lies have no place in public policy debates. I’d like to note, as well, that objections to the practice of astroturfing, and the fraudulent letters that resulted, is not about partisanship. It’s about something much more fundamental. This is about who gets heard in the halls of power. This is about the fact that we, as REAL grassroots, don’t necessarily have the astroturfers’ resources and corporate funding. According to media accounts, ACCCE spent over \$11 million in lobbying in the second quarter of this year alone. That’s on pace to spend roughly \$44 million for the year alone.

AAUW and similarly affected groups spend a fraction of this amount; we simply cannot hope to compete with corporations in the money department. But what groups like AAUW have always had is the honest, earnest voices of our members. When members of Congress receive a letter from AAUW and its members, it is critical that they feel confident that they are being contacted by real people committed to the mission of AAUW – not a phony who is trying to undermine the principles of our representative democracy.

If corporate-driven astroturf campaigns start corrupting the integrity of THAT commodity – the power of constituent voices – what tools are concerned citizens left with to improve the lives of our communities? Precious little. Quite frankly, it’s possible there were more letters stemming from this incident. Astroturfing happens more than people – and likely Congress – want to acknowledge, so it’s also quite probable that other unrelated but just as fraudulent letters have been sent to both the House and the Senate over the years. That is not partisanship, it’s the reality – and it undermines citizens’ confidence in their elected officials and their government.

AAUW believes it is very important that we call attention to these unscrupulous practices, in addition to protecting our good name. We have sounded the alarm so that all AAUW branches are on the lookout for these types of situations.

Mr. Chairman, I have a great job, working for an amazing group with a worthwhile mission. AAUW has worked for a more than a century to build our good reputation and keep our name untarnished. Our members have used their collective voices to break through many barriers for

women and girls. The notion that someone would come along and co-opt that name, or attempt to harness that collective voice under false pretenses, is a breathtaking and very personal deceit. And so AAUW has responded to set the record straight. I am pleased to add AAUW's voice to the call for reform. At the end of the day, AAUW is a community of women and men who will not be made into victims.